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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

WRITING AND READING LIVES:
POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN LIFE WRITINGS
OF/BY WEST AFRICAN WOMEN

BY

KATHRYN ANNE HARVEY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING 1991

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"Any competent listening depends on various kinds of background knowledge."
- Marjorie DeVault, "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint" 105

"Reading is a two-way street and by implicating myself in my reading, I am in turn transformed by that activity. I can never be a neutral observer of the structures of the texts I read, but my perspectives are also shaped, at least in part, by those present in the texts I discuss."
- Françoise Lionnet, Autobiographical Voices 28

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.....
Dr. Stephen Slemon
Supervisor

.....
Dr. Shirley Neuman

.....
Dr. Nasrin Rahimieh

DATE: April 19, 1991

To Mike

who gave me support

and encouragement in more ways

than I can name

ABSTRACT

This thesis finds itself at the intersection of two distinct but related debates. First, post-structuralist literary theories which suspend even the possibility of texts having a referential capacity have had especial impact on how life writings come to be written and read. But if one assumption holds true about how life writings are written, it is that the authors believe that their works have a referential capacity, a capacity to bring actual lives into focus. Secondly, this thesis deals with the process of arriving at actual textual representations. Who generates representations? How do biographers come to know their subjects enough to represent them? How do autobiographers choose to (re)present themselves in discourse?

West African women's life writings grounded in a tradition of realistic representation will be examined in relation to these two debates. This examination will serve a dual purpose: to demonstrate inadequacies of a post-structuralist scepticism of referentiality and to propose strategies for dealing with questions about the politics of ethnographic representation and self-representation.

Chapter One explores two ethnographic texts of different types--one by a West African woman, the other by foreign researchers--and investigates how the use of realistic representation helps to make manifest the various claims to authority present in the texts. Chapter Two examines a text in which distinctions between autobiography and ethnography, between fact and fiction, are blurred and attempts to sort out the various modes and orders of representation with a view toward a better understanding of the author

and her informants. Chapter Three looks at two autobiographies by West African women and examines the critical tendencies to treat autobiographies by "cultural Others" as ethnographic accounts.

This thesis grapples with the politics of realistic representation by showing how reading strategies affect the order of knowledge produced by life writings. Reading, like writing, entails making decisions about what is and is not important in texts. These decisions are ultimately political ones. The Conclusion, therefore, will emphasize the accountability of theorists for their work and will look ahead to ways of putting cross-cultural knowledge into action.

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Introduction:

Representation and its Challenges

In the preface to Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa by Awa Thiam, Benoîte Groult writes:

> The case histories and experiences which you are about to read ... are the quite unpretentious confidences which Awa Thiam has managed to collect .... [She] has not tried to bring us scientific information or statistics. Others have already done this. She brings us something rarer, something missing up till now: life itself, not as seen by an observer, but as it is experienced by the woman herself. (2)

What is important to Groult is that these case histories are told by actual women and describe real, lived experiences: they describe "life itself ... as it is experienced by the woman herself." Thiam makes similar claims:

> In an attempt to apprehend the true existence of the Black woman, and in particular the African woman ... we decided to listen to what she has to say ... when she is given an opportunity to speak for herself. (14)
>
> ...
>
> Black women from Africa are talking here. They express themselves simply as they reveal their problems. (15)

Groult and Thiam are not alone in their beliefs that life writings--various forms of autobiographical and biographical writings--have the capacity to refer to actual lives. Authors of life writings work from the basic premise that textual representations have the ability to describe and, furthermore, that they do describe the

specific lived experiences of particular individuals.

Critics, as well as authors, from a wide variety of disciplines hold the view that textual representations can realistically and accurately depict real people, real lives. Case studies, life histories, biographies and autobiographies make significant contributions to anthropological, sociological and historical research, and these life writings have also been extensively used by feminists working in various disciplines or working from a variety of "non-academic" perspectives in order to gain information about individual women's lived experiences. As the Personal Narratives Group observes in Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives:

> Listening to women's voices, studying women's writings, and learning from women's experiences have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of our understanding of the world. Since feminist theory is grounded in women's lives ... women's personal narratives are essential primary documents for feminist research. These narratives present and interpret women's life experiences. (4)

The members of the Personal Narratives Group see a correspondence between life writing and lived experience; however, they do not go as far as Groult and Thiam in claiming that "life itself" can be unproblematically represented in a narrative. Instead, the Personal Narratives Group stresses the hermeneutical "problems" of writing and reading a life:

> The act of constructing a life narrative forces the author to move from accounts of discrete experiences to an account of why and how the life took the shape it did. This why and how--the

> interpretive acts that shape a life, and a life narrative--need to take as high a place on the feminist agenda as the recording of women's experiences. (4)

Regardless of the different beliefs about the actual construction and interpretation of life writings, Groult, Thiam and the members of the Personal Narratives Group all believe that texts have the capacity to refer to real lives.

This assumption underlies much theorizing in the social sciences and also in the humanities. Elizabeth Bruss, a literary critic and theorist of autobiography, bases her theorizing upon the very same fundamental assumption that Groult, Thiam and the Personal Narratives Group work from. Speaking of autobiographical writings, Bruss contends that:

> there are limited generalizations to be made about the dimensions of action which are common to these autobiographies, and which seem to form the core of our notion of the functions an autobiographical text must perform. One may put these generalizations in the form of rules to be satisfied by the text and the surrounding context of any work which is to "count as" autobiography. (10)

These rules primarily deal with the truth-value of autobiographers' descriptions of their own experiences. The assumption underlying all of the rules[1] outlined by Bruss is that texts have the potential to convey lived experiences and it is up to the author to deliver:

> Any and all of these rules may be and occasionally are broken. But what is vital for creating the illocutionary force of the text is that the author purport to have met these requirements, and that the audience understand him to be responsible for meeting or failing to meet them. (11)

Although Bruss's discussion focuses exclusively on autobiography, the

rules can be broadened/re-worked to encompass the field of life writings in general.[2] It is generally true of life writings that the author attempts to represent her/his life as accurately as possible (in whatever form this would be) and that the audience recognizes this as one of the conventions of life writing and assumes that the text is able to convey lived experiences.

The assumption that life writings can and do convey truths, then, is made by a number of authors and critics alike. And it is not such a wild assumption. The passages quoted above from Benoîte Groult, Awa Thiam, the Personal Narratives Group and Elizabeth Bruss demonstrate how solidly held is the belief that texts can, indeed, impart knowledge about lived experiences.

At first glance, the field of life writing might seem obvious enough: life writings are texts which purport to tell the truth about the authors' (in the cases of autobiographical writings) and/or subjects' (in the cases of biographical writings) lives. However, questioning what constitutes a life opens up debate on a complex and highly contentious issue, as Gelya Frank and L.L. Langness show in Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography. But, if what constitutes a life is in question and if West African women's life writings can be said to constitute a field, then what is the "common denominator"[3] of that field? Life writings are supposedly based on lived experience. Thus, is it the "experiences" which are common to West African women which allow the personal narratives to be classed in the same category? Is there, as James Olney says, "both [a]

natural and necessary ... total, unified, integrated view [that] will be the informing spirit in accounts ... of their own lives" (Tell Me Africa 10)? Contrary to Olney's assertions, there is not such a view, judging from the life writings examined in the following chapters of this thesis. There is not a "total, unified, integrated view," not even any universal agreement about what "the" West African "experience" might be. In fact, judging from the diversity of the life writings of/by West African women, I think it is safe to say that there is not one unified "West African experience," but that there are multiple and even contradicting experiences of being "West African."

While identifying West African women's life writings as a viable theoretical field of analysis, I must, as we have just seen, grapple with problems which result from positing such a field. In "The Race for Theory," Barbara Christian questions the usefulness of creating fields in "theory" and of trying to create a monolithic theory to describe/evaluate/interpret, for example, the vast number of "energetic emerging literatures in the world today" (69). She points to a serious problem of theory's "gross generalizations about culture" (69) and remarks: "I, for one, am tired of being asked to produce a black feminist literary theory as if I were a mechanical man. For I believe such a theory is prescriptive--it ought to have some relationship to practice" (69). Christian's worry manifests itself--it seems to me--not in theory per se but in the way that critics tend to (ab)use theory.

Christian calls for a "shar[ing of] our process, that is, our practice" (69), which is ultimately the same view of theory-as-

practice that I find appealing and that Ketu Katrak (in "Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory of Postcolonial Women's Texts" 158) and Barbara Harlow (in Resistance Literature esp. chapter 1) envision. Katrak, following Harlow's lead, offers a view of theory which would satisfy Christian's criticisms of universalizing/totalizing theories: "It is useful ... to think of theory, as Barbara Harlow suggests, as strategy, to consider certain integral and dialectical relationships between theory and practice" (Katrak 158). This is all very important to remember when discussing a field such as "West African women's life writings" because inevitably having constructed a field--for example, one like James Olney's which posits that African autobiographies reveal the unified experience of Africanness--there will always be exceptions. I will keep in mind, then, that "West African women's life writings" is first and foremost a category in theory and not necessarily in fact.

As a category in theory, the field which this thesis addresses is problematic in two ways. First of all, the category "West African women" is not "lived," and when critics move beyond seeing it as a descriptive category only, then problems usually arise. For example, recall James Olney's vision of the "informing spirit," the essential "Africanness," of African autobiographies. Such a view is far more problematic than it is helpful, as we shall see. Secondly, the category of "life writings" is problematic; as literary texts, life writings are subject to post-structural literary critiques, which have "suspended" the notion of a referent. Thus, a post-structuralist reading of life writings would argue (or would at least assume) that

the personal narratives cannot and do not refer to real lives.[4] I will take up below these two challenges to the field of "West African women's life writings."

The first challenge comes from the multiplicity of experiences of West African women. As I stated above, "West African women" is not a "lived" category in the sense that there is an experience common to all women of West Africa; rather, it should be thought of as a provisional, descriptive term used to signify a very diverse group of women. Too often, however, descriptive terms are taken prescriptively to refer to an "always-already constituted group" (Mohanty 338); for instance, assuming that women are always victims of social forces is less helpful--and potentially more damaging for the women being "studied"--than, perhaps, assuming that women are often victims of social forces and exploring how this is the case.

In her article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Talpade Mohanty outlines the problem with creating discursive fields in relation to the creation of the category "women":

> By women as a category of analysis, I am referring to the critical assumption that all of us of the same gender, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis. (337)

Mohanty goes on to argue that "an elision takes place between 'women' as a discursively constructed group and 'women' as material subjects of their own history. Thus, the discursively consensual homogeneity of 'women' as a group is mistaken for the historically specific

material reality of groups of women" (337-338). So is Mohanty implying that we should stop discursively constructing "categories of analysis"? No, but she does send out warning signals intended to make us aware of how we construct and use such categories. "Again," Mohanty states, "I am not objecting to the use of universal groupings for descriptive purposes. Women from the continent of Africa can be characterized as 'Women of Africa.' It is when 'women of Africa' becomes a homogeneous sociological grouping ... that problems arise" (340). And since the women whose life writings which I will examine may have nothing more in common than that they were born and raised in the geographical region commonly designated as West Africa, I intend to use the term "West African women" as descriptive one only. Thus, the sign "West African women" will, in this thesis, refer not to an "always-already constituted" homogeneous group but to heterogeneous groups of people.

The second challenge to the field of "West African women's life writings" does not allow for such an easy resolution of the criticisms. I turn now to the problem, posed by Anglo-American post-structuralists, of "life writings" as a discursively constructed "category of analysis." In a nutshell, post-structuralists assert that there is no outside of a text, or--to put it another way--that texts have neither a referential ca[illegible] nor unified referents. If referentiality is an illusion, then post-structuralist theories would have a profound impact upon life writings, since authors and readers alike generally assume that life writings do have "referents." More importantly, however, life writings are assumed to have a referential

capacity as well. Thus, post-structuralist assertions to the contrary have opened up a debate in literary theory about the status of the referent in life writings.

In order to set up the terms of this debate, I want to backtrack for a moment. In Course on General Linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure elaborates a representational theory of language, which has had a significant influence on literary discourse. Saussure identifies the literary sign as being composed of two parts: the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept or meaning), and he asserts that there is no intrinsic relation between them: "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" ("Nature of the Linguistic Sign" 5). Saussure continues: "Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: the linguistic sign is arbitrary" (5, his emphasis). Although there is no intrinsic relation connecting signifiers and signifieds--and, by implication, signs and referents (Eagleton 97)--that is "not [to] imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker" (Saussure 6); instead signifiers and signifieds are linked by convention (6).

The Saussurean theory of language allows for the possibility that texts have the capacity to refer. Anglo-American post-structuralists, however, shift focus away from the system of language (what Saussure calls langue) to actual speaking practices (what Saussure calls parole), and they argue that signifiers and signifieds (and, by extension, signs and referents) are not conventionally linked. Instead, meanings result from "a potentially endless play of

signifiers, rather than a concept tied firmly to the tail of a particular signifier" (Eagleton 127). Whereas Saussure--by suggesting that "language is a social institution and that it is a reality having its seat in the brain" (Baker and Hacker 268)--gestures in two different and seemingly incompatible directions as to how meanings are generated, post-structuralists argue that meaning is generated as a possible by-product of strings of signifiers. Referentiality is no longer a "given"; in fact, post-structuralists call into question the entire possibility of the referentiality of texts.

Hayden White's discussion of tropes (figures of speech) in "Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human Consciousness" is, for example, quite similar to Terry Eagleton's description (cited above) of a post-structuralist belief about speaking practices. White, speaking of tropes, says:

> troping is both a movement from one notion of the way things are related to another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise.... This is why we can agree with [Harold] Bloom's contention that "all interpretation depends upon the antithetical relation between meanings, and not on the supposed relation between a text and its meaning." (209)

Thus, interpretations are generated by meanings working with and against each other, and meanings are generated by the play of signifiers. What is important in all this for a literary analysis of life writings is that the referent gets lost or is suspended, since post-structuralists often view literary texts as entities (seemingly) divorced from material conditions of production.

The debate, spurred by post-structuralist literary theory,

surrounding the referentiality of texts has especial significance to the interpretation of life writings. On the one hand, authors and readers of life writings justifiably assume that the referents of the personal narratives exist, and, moreover, that the texts are able to convey "truths" about these referents. Benoîte Groult, Awa Thiam, the Personal Narratives Group and Elizabeth Bruss, for instance, believe that texts have "obvious" referents--the women whose stories are told--and that texts also have the capacity to refer. On the other hand, Anglo-American post-structuralist literary theorists suspend the referent and argue that texts do not have a referential capacity.

Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin, entering this debate from the field of post-colonial literatures, suggest that post-structuralist readings of the sort that baldly assert the notion that "'there has never been anything but writing'" and that "'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte'" (Jacques Derrida in Slemon/Tiffin x) miss the point that Derrida himself makes concerning the nature of linguistic texts. "It is by now generally recognised," Slemon and Tiffin contend, "that this argument is in no way theoretically constrained to occlude social materiality ... in literary production and consumption" (x, their emphasis). Despite the compatibility of Derrida's claims with a critique which takes into account material practices, Anglo-American post-structuralists, who have had a significant impact on literary-theoretical discourse, have essentially ignored critiques compatible with Derrida's:

> In practice ... this 'suspension' of the referent in the literary sign, and the 'crisis in representation' which has followed in its wake, has effected within the dominant forms of

> Anglo-American post-structuralist theory a wholesale retreat from geography and history into a domain of pure 'textuality' in which the principle of indeterminacy smothers the possibility of social or political 'significance' for literature. (x)

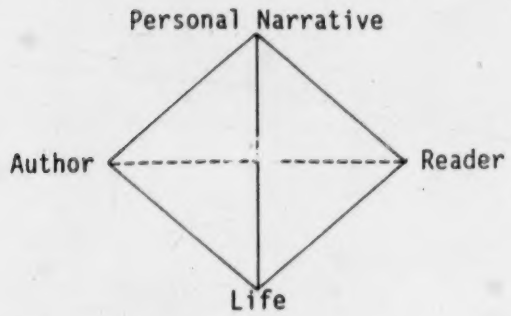
Although (and here I would have to agree with Slemon and Tiffin) post-structuralist readings of texts might be little else than wilful acts which "could only have gained credence within a dominant segment of a dominant culture" (x), their effects have resonated in many academic disciplines in North America--especially in literature and anthropology departments.

It is not difficult to see why post-structuralism has posed such a challenge to the reading of life writings. Beliefs about the nature of textuality necessarily affect reading practices, and that is why post-structuralist literary theories make life writings appear to be "impossible" texts. It would be easy, then, to simply ignore post-structuralist theories which suspend the referent. To do so, however, would be to avoid replying to problems inherent in the nature of textuality, and it might also be tantamount to ignoring the insights which post-structuralist theories offer for the analysis of texts. These theories, for example, draw attention to the constructed nature of texts and demonstrate that the belief in the possibility of mimetic representation of referents is naive. This latter insight immediately highlights problem-areas in Benoîte Groult's and Awa Thiam's assertions about the nature of Speak Out, Black Sisters. Is it possible for a text to adequately and/or accurately convey "life itself"? What--if anything--in lived experience is beyond representation?

I have presented thus far two observations which are fundamental to my analysis of West African women's life writings: first, "West African women" should not be seen as a linguistic sign used to refer to a homogeneous "always-already constituted" group; the lived experiences of each West African woman are enough to call down the use of such a sweeping term for any other than descriptive purposes. Secondly, the post-structuralist suspension of the referent presents a challenge to the basic premise of life writings--that life writings have referents and, moreover, have the capacity to refer. Where do these problems and contradictions lead in reading and theorizing about life writings?

This thesis explores the order of knowledge acquired from reading life writings. And since representation plays a major role in narrative texts--especially in life writings--and in the construction of knowledge, I shall examine the role and the politics of representation in life writings of/by West African women.

W.J.T. Mitchell's "textbook" description, in Critical Terms for Literary Theory, of how representation works will be a helpful starting point. According to Mitchell, "representation is always of something or someone, by something or someone, to someone" (12). The various terms involved in a successful representation are perhaps more clearly explained by a diagram from Mitchell's essay which I have adapted to fit the specific uses to which I will put "representation" in my thesis:



The horizontal line between the author and reader constitutes what Mitchell calls the "axis of communication" which "link[s] the persons who understand the relation" of the personal narrative to the life it represents. The vertical line linking the personal narrative to the life is called the "axis of representation" (12).

If a representation is to be successful, there must be communication between the author and reader, both of whom "agree" that the personal narrative stands for the real life of a person. But all representations are not successful. Mitchell outlines a site at which problems can occur:

> The crossing of these axes suggests, I hope, one of the potential problems that comes up with representations: they present a barrier that "cuts across," as it were, our lines of communication with others, presenting the possibility of misunderstanding, error, or downright falsehood. (12)

Although Mitchell mentions only "one of the potential problems" suggested by the diagram, there are many others. The following list demonstrates the many points at which problems can occur. I will call these problem areas, indicated by the arrows, "gaps":

author <---> life
author <---> reader
author <---> personal narrative
life <---> personal narrative
reader <---> personal narrative
life <---> reader

Examples of how these gaps affect the representations--and thus the order of knowledge acquired from the representations--in West African women's life writings will be examined in more detail in Chapters One, Two and Three. But for now, I shall offer an example of some of the issues at play which problematize any notion of straightforward or unproblematic representation. For my example, I will take the first pair of terms listed above--the author and the life. Three possible relationships exist between these two terms: 1) the biographer and the subject of the life writing never meet, so the author works through previously constructed representations of the subject; 2) the biographer and the subject do meet, and the biographer thus generates her own representations of the subject based on first-hand knowledge; and 3) the author is the subject of the life writing, and thus engages in self-representation.

In the first of these cases, there may exist a temporal and/or geographical distance between the author and the life; the author may be writing about someone who lived 200 years ago or about a living person, in another area of the world, whom s/he has never met or talked to. In either situation, the author will not be interacting with the <u>real</u> life of the person being written about; the author will be dealing with previously constructed <u>representations</u> of the life. In other words, author and subject have no first-hand knowledge of one

another.

In the second case, if the author and the person whose life is to be represented--I will call this person the informant--meet and discuss the life, many complex interactions occur. Factors constitutive of humans--race, gender, age and religious beliefs, for example[5]--will likely affect the possible relationships between author and informant. Likewise, the representations of race, gender and age mediating the relationship will influence the author's perceptions of the informant and vice versa.

In the third case, if the author is also the subject of the representations, as Sidonie Smith explains in A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation, there is a temporal disjuncture between the author (at the moment of writing) and her past, and thus memory plays a crucial role in the constructions of self-(re)presentations:[6]

> the autobiographer has to rely on a trace of something from the past, a memory; yet memory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience, so that recovering the past is ... an interpretation of earlier experience that can never be divorced from the filterings of subsequent experience or articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling. (45)

As we can see, the three sets of relationships between author and life involve many complex interactions, and the interactions between the other terms in the above-cited list are no less complex. Thus, it should be evident that what goes on in the gaps among the various terms poses many potential problems for representation--especially since these potential problems are not

articulated; they have to be inferred.

If, as Mitchell suggests, "representation is always of something or someone, by something or someone, to someone" (12), then I see an opening for other challenges to representation. Who is (re)presenting whom? Who is the "intended" audience? Why is the author writing the personal narrative? and why now? These questions--by no means the only ones--challenge representation to "lay bare" its own politics, its own assumptions. Thus, these questions, among others, will provide a foundation for my theorizing about the problems for, and politics of, representation in West African women's life writings.

I might be led to assume that any knowledge acquired through representations is necessarily unstable given all of the potential problems arising for representation. Such a belief might, in turn, lead me to scepticism about the usefulness of representations and even about the ability of representations to function at all. Each of the chapters to follow will address the problems for, and politics of, the representations in specific texts, and they will address what order of knowledge is acquired from life writings given the debate over the referentiality of texts.

The five texts to be examined present slightly different approaches to writing lives; nonetheless, each author holds the belief, common to the genre of life writing, that the narratives can and do represent the lived experiences of actual women. Chapter One will focus on Awa Thiam's study (Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa) of female sexual oppression in West

Africa and on editor Patricia Romero's Life Histories of African Women, which contains brief life histories of three West African women. These two texts to varying degrees rely on realistic representations to carry the weight of their ethnographic "truths"; they also present biographical representations of their subjects. My focus, therefore, will be upon the problems with realistic representation, the politics of biographical/ethnographic representation and the order of knowledge acquired as a result of the representations.

Chapter Two will explore American anthropologist Laura Bohannan's Return to Laughter. This autobiography (covering only the period of her involvement in fieldwork in Nigeria) blurs distinctions between non-fiction, fiction, ethnography, and autobiography, and thus serves as a highly useful context for framing questions about mimetic versus problematized representation and about ethnographical versus autobiographical representation. The task of this chapter will be to try to sort out the various modes (mimetic, problematized) and orders (ethnographical, autobiographical) of representation in an attempt to determine what may be learned from Return to Laughter.

Chapter Two prepares the way for my discussion in Chapter Three of the autobiographies of Buchi Emecheta and Nafissatou Diallo. Whereas Chapter One to a large extent focuses upon a Self writing about an Other and whereas Chapter Two concentrates upon a Self writing about herself in the process of representing Others, Chapter Three converges on the Other writing about herself, or--to put it another way--the Self writing about the Self and consequently being

read as the ethnographic Other. Buchi Emecheta's Head Above Water and Nafissatou Diallo's A Dakar Childhood mark a return to the use of mimetic representation to convey lived experiences. So Chapter Three will explore the different claims of knowledge that result from the use of mimeticism in autobiographical (as opposed to ethnographic or biographical) writings.

Theorizing about life writings entails making decisions about reading strategies; how I read a text will affect the order of knowledge produced. My Conclusion, therefore, will draw together the reading strategies with which I have approached West African women's life writings. By grappling with the contradictions concerning the referentiality of texts inherent in the genre of life writing, I hope to propose a set of reading strategies which will answer Ketu Katrak's call for "Social responsibility ... [as] the basis of any theorizing" (157). For, if there is any truth to the assertion that "Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers" (Schweickart 24), socially responsible reading and theorizing will lead to socially responsible action.

Notes

1. Very briefly, these three rules are as follows:

> Rule 1. An autobiographer undertakes a dual role. He is the source of the subject matter and the source for the structure to be found in his text....
>
> Rule 2. Information and events reported in connection with the autobiographer are asserted to have been, to be, or to have potential for being the case. [The author purports to tell the truth about her- or him-self, and the] audience is expected to accept these reports as true....
>
> Rule 3. Whether or not what is reported can be discredited, whether or not it can be reformulated in some more generally acceptable way from another point of view, the autobiographer purports to believe in what he asserts. (Bruss 10-11)

2. For example, Rule 1 would have to be broadened to include the relationship between biographer and informant/subject; Rule 2 would still apply bearing in mind that it would have to be broadened to include biographical relationships of author/subject; and Rule 3 would simply require the inclusion of, once again, a statement to the effect that "the biographer also 'purports to believe in what [she or] he asserts.'"

3. This is a term borrowed from Gelya Frank's article "Finding the Common Denominator: A Phenomenological Approach to Biography" Ethos 7 (1979): 68-94.

4. I do not want to convey the impression that post-structuralism is a unified theoretical field; it is not. There are many different ways which post-structuralist critiques can be employed, but for my purposes I am interested in highlighting one post-structuralist view--that of suspending the referent.

5. I have by no means covered all of the factors which may influence the relation between author and life, but I have covered enough to demonstrate just how complex the relations can be.

6. See Sidonie Smith, Chapter 3 especially pages 45-47. I will be using the term "(re)presentation" to draw attention to the dual meaning of the word. In other words, I would like to stress both the function of representation--one thing standing in for something else--and the nature of representation--the fact that it is artificial and constructed.

Chapter 1: Working from Transparencies

> But what is the use of writing about Black women, if in so doing we do not learn what they are in reality? It is up to these women themselves to set the record straight.
> - Awa Thiam, Speak Out, Black Sisters 14

> Whatever their relation to the larger world in which they lived, each of these women [the subjects of life histories] was an unique individual ... This same individuality is also present in the contributors to this volume. They like their subjects, have their own cultural baggage which they carry with them to their fields of specialization.
> - Patricia Romero, "Introduction," Life Histories of African Women 1

Ethnography and realism

Ethnography, as George Marcus and Michael Fischer describe it, is "a research process in which the anthropologist closely observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture ... and then writes an account of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail" (18). These accounts vary widely in their specific focuses. Some ethnographies emphasize collective social values; others stress particular rituals or customs, and still others concentrate on individual lives. It is this last form of ethnographic account which this chapter will examine.

Ethnographers, especially those writing case studies and life histories, attempt to portray the realities of the lives of their informants, and to this end, "Realist texts," explain Marcus and Fischer, "constitute the dominant legacy of the influential genre of British ethnography created in the 1920s" (55). The use of mimetic representation in this tradition basically serves two purposes: to

establish the ethnographer's textual authority and to carry the weight of the ethnographic "truths." I will explore the implications, for ethnographic accounts, of both the explicit and implicit claims to authority and truth which manifest themselves in realistic representations.

Many researchers use ethnographic research methods to gain insights into the workings of cultures or social groups, and feminists are no exception. The direct, active engagement which fieldwork allows for has been appealing to many feminist researchers, because the interviewing process enabled by the close contact of researcher and informant permits the possibility of communication on a very fundamental level: researchers do not have to rely on second- or third-hand information about their "subjects." Many feminists envision the possibility of informants being "looked upon [not] as research 'objects' but as sisters, as mirrors of selves, as 'subjects'" (Klein 94), thus, as equal partners in the research endeavour.

But viewing informants as equal partners in the research process is, perhaps, more easily said than done. Ideally, the informant and the researcher are on equal footing and rapport can be established in any encounter; however, friendship, empathy and copious amounts of goodwill may not be enough to establish the needed rapport because, as Judith Stacey observes, fieldwork is based upon a certain amount of inequality and "the exploitative aspect of [the] ethnographic process seem[s] unavoidable" (23).[1] Generally the fieldworker has the

freedom to leave the field; the informant, however, is not always so free to do so. Having pointed to a potential problem caused by imbalances of power in the field, I want to add that it is not my main concern here to highlight all the problems (or, indeed, benefits) resulting from fieldwork situations. I merely want to mention the problem of imbalances of power between researcher and informant in order to underscore the difficulty of regarding representations as objective textual reconstructions of the world and to hint at the politics involved in generating the representations.

Basically, mimetic representations serve two purposes. The first is to establish the author's textual authority. This authority is, however, not unproblematic, since the fieldwork research is itself imbued with "political" concerns such as imbalances of power between researcher and informant and the questions concerning who writes about whom. Representations constructed as a result of such complex interactions in the field are necessarily more problematic than <u>mimetic</u> representations let on. But is the authority of the ethnographer, whom we depend on to give us the "facts," entirely undermined by the claim that representations are problematic? Should readers of ethnographic accounts stop trusting the information imparted by the texts? Readers, I think, should not completely discredit the abilities of ethnographers to (re)present others; they can, however, begin to look at the role of the ethnographer as an active generator and purveyor of representations. In other words, I am not suggesting that the fieldwork situations are so complex that there is no basis for textual authority; what I am saying is that

textual authority is itself a constructed position which carries no "natural" or "essential" influence regarding the truth-value of its propositions.

The use of ethnographic mimetic representations serves the second function, as I mentioned earlier, of conveying factual information about Others. Mimetic representations apparently claim to reveal objective truths which have "self-evident" meanings. In other words, the truth lies in the world, and it is the job of representation to reveal the truth. However, the question of whether we believe in these "self-evident" representations hinges, in part, upon our beliefs about the authority of the ethnographer and upon our faith in the authoritativeness of the information imparted by the informants. Although born out of collaborative efforts, the ethnographic account is ultimately controlled by the researcher who, although limited by disciplinary constraints and the politics of the publication industry, in the end determines the final product.[2] "Here, too," cautions Stacey, "elements of inequality, exploitation, and even betrayal are endemic to ethnography" (23). If readers do not believe the ethnographic authority, in all likelihood they will be more hesitant to take the text's representations as the truth than if they feel they can trust the ethnographer and her/his narrative.

But questioning the authoritativeness of the ethnographer forms only part of the larger "crisis in representation." If the authority of the author is the key issue in determining the truth-value of an ethnographic account, we might suppose that the notion of representing truth is an attainable goal. But the problem is not that simple. For

example, post-structuralist literary theories have gained currency in many anthropology departments and have resulted in the destabilization of the perceived "authority" of realistic texts (see Rabinow "Representations are Social Facts" and Geertz Works and Lives, Chapter 6). Post-structuralist analyses of literary texts proclaim the impossibility of referentiality and create a dilemma for writers and readers of ethnographic accounts. Representation in the ethnographic realist tradition assumes that referentiality is possible, yet post-structuralist theories say this cannot be.

In addition, as I have stated, ethnographic fieldwork involves many complex interactions between the researcher and the informants; thus the research findings cannot be as straightforwardly objective as the realist representations may suggest.[3] Realist representations efface the politics of representation or the ideological "intrusions" in the gaps among the four terms involved in representation: the life, the author, the text, and the reader. Gelya Frank presents a concise description of one problem for representation which can result from communication barriers between researcher and informant and between author and reader:

> If there is a lack of shared assumptions between the investigator and the subject, there will almost certainly be misinterpretations by the investigator that will be passed on to the reader, and the life history will fail to do what it purports to do, that is, render an account of the subject's actual experiences. (84)

If authors and readers are aware of these potential problems for representation, Stacey's suggestion might well be worth consideration. She recommends that "rigorous self-awareness of the ethical pitfalls

in the method enables one to monitor and then to mitigate some of the dangers to which ethnographers expose their informants" (26). Following Stacey's lead, I want to bring an awareness of problems endemic to written, representational accounts of fieldwork research to the analysis of two ethnographic texts which are grounded in the realist ethnographic tradition. These texts are Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters and editor Patricia Romero's Life Histories of African Women.

Mimetic representation and self-evident meanings

Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa,[4] a feminist analysis of female sexual oppression in West Africa, is, as the subtitle of the translated edition suggests, an exhortation to African women to lift up their voices against oppression. Thiam examines the practices of clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation, polygamy, sexual initiation, and skin whitening by putting them into their historical, cultural, and social contexts. Working through various religious arguments and arguments based upon the necessity of maintaining traditional values, Thiam contextualizes the practices of clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation in order to demonstrate that they have no real basis beyond Patriarchal Law.

The book was originally published in French under the title La Parole aux Negresses, and the nuances of this title, important to my conceptualization of the book, have been lost in translation. The play on the word negresses, which could be read as "Black women" and as "ghostwriters," intimates the double nature of the representations

housed in the book. First, Thiam lets the Black women speak for themselves and shows that these women are representative of a large segment of the West African female population. The Black women whose voices we hear in the text are important because they tell their own stories. Secondly, these women are important as the "ghostwriters" of Thiam's text, in the sense that even though we know that individual voices manifest themselves in the text, the women remain virtually unidentifiable. And the Black women have as much right to be called authors of Speak Out, Black Sisters as Thiam does.

Thiam uses mimetic representation as a rhetorical strategy for asserting the veracity of her claims; she also assumes that "telling it like it is" is possible and even unproblematic. Implicit in Thiam's belief in mimetic representation is the belief that her text has a determinate meaning:

> But what is the use of writing about Black women, if in so doing we do not learn what they are in reality? It is up to these women themselves to set the record straight.
>
> In an attempt to apprehend the true existence of the Black women, and in particular the African woman, for she is the subject matter of this book, we decided to listen to what she has to say ... when she is given an opportunity to speak for herself. (14, her emphasis)

The women will speak for themselves and what they mean will be self-evident. Thiam continues:

> Anyone who is expecting feminist diatribes should not read on. Black women from Africa are talking here. They express themselves simply as they reveal their problems. We can deduce from their own words what their actual relationship to men is, what it means to live their daily lives in their communities. (15)

The women's voices assume an air of being both autobiographical and transparent, or at least this is what Thiam wants me to believe.

Part One of Thiam's book is appropriately titled "The Voices of Black Women" and contains realistic "autobiographical" life stories of eight women, as well as Thiam's conversation with seven men and seven women. Part Two, which relies on realist representation as well, presents many women's voices. This time, the women address specific issues: clitoridectomy, excision, infibulation, institutionalized polygamy and sexual initiation. That the women may not express themselves adequately or that the words in the text do not have self-evident meanings is never even intimated: the women simply say what they mean and present themselves "in reality."

Barriers to communication between Thiam and her informants are not represented; Thiam writes as if there were no great problem "translating" women's lives into written representations. Thus, meaning should be self-evident because the facts about clitoridectomy, excision, infibulation, polygamy, etc. are imparted realistically and truthfully. But translation is a problem in Thiam's text: Thiam does not inform her readers of the language(s) in which she conducted her interviews or of the process of transcribing and editing her material. Nor does Thiam's translator, Dorothy Blair, speak to the question of her translation of the text.[5]

Thiam's own thoughts about the sexual oppression of Black West African women are transparently represented as well. One reviewer of Speak Out, Black Sisters has, in what I assume to be a political move, chosen to comment uncritically upon Thiam's straightforward prose:

> The unique format of the book allows Thiam to address several universal themes such as power relations, the colonial mentality, tokenism, the limitations of Black nationalism, exclusion, sexual objectification, violence and the privilege of whiteness. In addressing these themes Thiam speaks with a clear and simple voice. (Simms 37)

Glenda Simms, the reviewer, points exactly to one effect of the use of mimetic representations and realistic prose: the tendency to treat mimetic representations as "clear and simple" descriptions of lived experience.

In accordance with the diagram presented in my Introduction, we see Thiam conflating the relations among life, author, and text with the result that the meaning of the text should be self-evident to any reader; Thiam deems as unproblematical the relations among these terms. Similarly, in Patricia Romero's collection, Life Histories of African Women, the relations among life, author, and text are presented unproblematically. Romero's collection contains seven life histories, but only the three pertaining to West African women will receive attention here.

The authors of these three life histories--Beverly Mack, Enid Schildkrout and Ivor Wilks--utilize realist representation to varying degrees to (re)present the ethnographic "truths" of those they write about. Mack's life history of Hajiya Ma'daki ("Hajiya Ma'daki: A Royal Hausa Woman") uses typical realistic representations, and Mack's voice is present as the objective voice of authority:

> Ma'daki was born in the Kano palace around 1907, after Emir Abbas had replaced Aliyu as Emir of Kano. As the daughter of a concubine, Ma'daki enjoyed the privileges of royal life. She grew up in an environment that was both economically and politically secure, at least for the women of the secluded

> harem. Kano Emir Abdullahi (1855-83) was her grandfather along both paternal and maternal lines: he captured her concubine mother's parents in a slave-raid, and he was also the father of her father, Kano Emir Abbas. (54)

As we can see from this passage, which is characteristic of the life history as a whole, Mack's voice is a voice removed. In fact, she uses the first-person only once: in a note listing her acknowledgements.

Enid Schildkrout's "Hajiya Husaina: Notes on the Life History of a Hausa Woman" is a realistic representation of Husaina's life. But it is more self-conscious of the realist purchase. Schildkrout's narrative reveals more of the interplay between the researcher(s)[6] and the informant, and Schildkrout is more self-reflexive in her narrative than is Mack:

> We spoke a lot about the type of dowry, or kayan daki girls had in the old days, since Husaina's adult life was very much taken up with helping her daughters collect their own kayan daki. Husaina discussed the different types of bowls which women collected in the 1970s and in the past. This was an issue of major concern for Husaina and for her daughters, as it is for most Kano women. (83-84)

This self-reflexivity, however, merely calls attention to the interview situation; it does not provide any insights into the actual process of production, by which I mean the dynamics of the fieldwork interviewing procedures and the problems, if any, of communication.

One feature common to Thiam's book and the life histories written by Mack and Schildkrout is the liberal use of quotations taken from informant-interviews. Authors often make room for the informants' voices to be heard in the narrative; this permits readers

to "hear" directly the words of the informants. But it is authors who ultimately construct the final shape of the life history narratives; thus, it is really the authors who construct the story. Quotations strategically placed in the narrative corroborate the story which the author tells about her/his subject. In other words, quotations are often employed in order to establish the life historian's authority (see Clifford "On Ethnographic Authority" 50-51). Quotations from researcher-informant interviews provide "proof" that authors have actually talked with the subjects of their narratives. According to this view of the use of quotations, the informant's voices in Thiam's, Mack's and Schildkrout's writings serve as vehicles necessary for the establishment both of the relevance of a case study/life history and of the authority of the author.

Ivor Wilks's life history of Akyaawa Yikwan ("She Who Blazed a Trail: Akyaawa Yikwan of Asante") takes an approach to representing a life which is different from the approach taken by either Mack or Schildkrout. The subject of Wilks's narrative lived over 200 years ago. And since Wilks has no access to a time machine, he has to rely on previously constructed representations of Akyaawa's life: Wilks gathers his information from his interview of Akyaawa's great-great-grand-daughter and from travellers' accounts of meeting or hearing about Akyaawa. He also relies on the information which he has accumulated over the years as a specialist in the Asante. Wilks's project involves a lot of guesswork, and he often reminds his readers of this in the form of qualifying statements such as the "brief reference to Akyaawa ... seems to imply," "it seems likely" and "it

was reported" (123). In fact, Wilks writes: "The sources for Akyaawa's career are ... of a far from conventional kind, and considerable reliance has to be placed on information transmitted by word of mouth over the generations" (115). This "far from conventional kind" of information gathered by Wilks points to a historical barrier to communication in the sense that oral histories are not as easily verifiable as written histories because there are generally no records of the previous tellings of a story by which to evaluate a current rendering of that story.

But despite the speculative language, Wilks, too, relies upon realistic representation to carry the weight of the ethnographic "truths" presented in the narrative. The focus of Akyaawa's life history is, most likely because of a lack of information, not on her "private" life, but her public role in early nineteenth-century Ghana:

> Akyaawa and her colleagues spent three days in Elmina. The major business was transacted on 15 September, after Akyaawa had been presented with cloths and cases of rum and gin. [F.] Last [the Dutch governor of Elmina] informed her that he was about to send his own envoy to Kumase and wished her to know the contents of his message.... Early the next morning Akyaawa returned to the Cape Coast. (130)

Wilks does not claim that his narrative is the complete story of Akyaawa, yet he does rely upon the assumption that realistic representations will convey "truths" about Akyaawa's existence.

Let us take stock, here, of the different claims being made by Thiam, Mack, Schildkrout, and Wilks. Thiam's text openly attests to the author's belief in the possibility of mimetic representation, while the narratives in Romero's collection, somewhat less dogmatic

about the self-evidence of the meaning of the narratives, are nevertheless solidly grounded in the realist tradition. Unlike Thiam, Beverly Mack and Enid Schildkrout make no explicit claims about the obviousness of their informants' statements, and Ivor Wilks openly states his uncertainty about some of his information. All of the above narratives, however, explicitly or implicitly rely on the author's textual authority, an authority which may be established in various ways: the author may write "objectively" in a way which entirely avoids a "first-person" account, or the author may opt to declare her/his presence in the narrative by writing a "first-person" account. The former writing strategy is commonly employed to suggest that anyone can see the facts if s/he were to look hard enough, since there is only one correct interpretation of the facts. The latter case is a common strategy for showing the "'I was there' element [which] establishes the unique authority of the anthropologist" (Rabinow 244, my emphasis). As Mineke Schipper explains,

> It has often been argued that the change from third-person to first-person narrative form is not a question of pure formality but it may underline the authenticity of the story, or it may be used to reinforce the illusion of reality, as a realistic device. (54)

The "presence" or "absence" of the author's voice is, thus, not merely a matter of stylistics. While some critics assert that "the facts of the matter [in ethnography] may be kept separate, at least in principle, from their means of communication," James Clifford reminds us that "the literary or rhetorical dimensions of ethnography can no longer be so easily compartmentalized. They are active at every level

of cultural science" ("Introduction" 4). Rhetoric plays an important role in the construction of any written representation, and the perceived "scientific" authority in the books representing West African women's lives rests both in the nature of realistic representation--which makes its own claims to "authority"--and in the belief that language can transparently (re)present reality.

The problems with transparency and the politics of ethnographic representation

Implicit in the belief that (textual) mimetic representation is possible--that reality can be represented unproblematically--is the belief that language is able to convey reality transparently, the belief that mimetic ethnographic representations are straightforward representations of other peoples or cultures. Thiam's text, for example, documents instances of what Thiam sees as practices aimed at controlling women's sexuality, and Thiam tells the reader that her words and the women's stories will speak for themselves. As a reader, I am not asked to question the validity of the women's voices or to regard the representation of the voices as being in any way problematic.

Indeed, assuming that realistic representations are possible has some obvious advantages. Thiam's text outlines the oppression of women resulting from various practices whose effects are the control of women's sexuality. In order to be able to assert the urgency and reality of this problem, realistic representation calls attention to the materiality of West African women's oppression. The first

epigraph above, the passage from Thiam's "Introduction," demonstrates the perceived necessity of vocalizing oppressive realities so they may be openly dealt with. The authors of the life histories in Romero's collection similarly depend on the realist purchase this time to celebrate the lived experiences of their informants. And documents such as Gordon Allport's "A Tentative Set of Rules for the Preparation and Evaluation of Life Histories and Case Studies" (ca. 1930), as well as studies employing qualitative research methodologies, attest to the fact that the ability to generate realist ethnographies is often taken for granted or is at the very least assumed to be possible.

However, the transition from life to text to a meaning constructed by the reader is by no means an uncomplicated affair. On one level, the transition from life to text (the translation of the totality of lived experience into a textual representation) is complicated by different conceptualizations of the nature of language. If we conceive of language, as F.R. Leavis does, as capable of conveying the "unmediated nature of reality" (Bhabha 94) then we would have no problem seeing words as "invit[ing] us, not to 'think about' and judge but to 'feel into' or 'become'--to realize a complex experience that is given in the words. They demand not merely a fuller-bodied response, but a completer responsiveness..." (Leavis 212-213). However, if we conceive of language as a system of signs in which meanings are generated through differences among signs--as do structuralists and post-structuralists, for example--then we would not be as willing to grant the possibility that reality can be "unmediated." According to one view, as Bhabha points out, "reality

is not given but produced; its meanings transformative, historical and relational rather than revelatory" (Bhabha 96). On another level, ethnographic representations usually take a biographical form; therefore, the transition from life to text is mediated not only by language but also by a second-party, the ethnographer (see Frank).

Just as the movement from life to text is not unproblematical, neither is the movement from text to meaning uncomplicated. Gelya Frank sees a definite gap between the practice of writing and the practice of reading ethnographic representations. Authors of life histories will generally admit that "a life history is only a selected sample of a person's experiences .... In practice, [however,] the life history has been treated [by readers] as a direct representation of the informant's life, as something almost equivalent to the informant's life" (72). A split develops between the authorial recognition that a life history does not equal a life and the apparently common interpretation of a life history "as something almost equivalent to the informant's life." Yet no matter how hard authors try to include everything in a representation, readers should keep in mind that "Any one concept about life is never as rich as the reality it points to" (Langness and Frank 88). Reading as if there were no gap between the text and the meaning (constructed by the reader) signals what I see as a very problematic assumption about the nature of representation. Similarly, reading as if there were no gaps in the thoroughly mediated movement from life to meaning signals what I see as the main problem of mimetic representation.

The generation of textual representations is, it would seem, an incredibly complex process. Barriers to communication and questions about the nature of language and representation all confound the perceived straightforwardness of mimetic representation, and at stake in this confusion is the epistemological status of the proclaimed "truths." In addition, anthropologists ask with increasing frequency about the politics of ethnographic representation. In particular, they ask the question, who has the ability or the right to (re)present whom? As the second epigraph above (taken from Patricia Romero's "Introduction" to Life Histories of African Women) contends, ethnographers are not neutral observers free from ideological and "cultural baggage." Ethnographers "like their subjects, have their own cultural baggage which they carry with them to their fields of specialization."

The general debate about the politics of representation has taken two major turns in anthropology: one deals with the question of "native" or "indigenous" ethnography; the other deals with the question of foreigners--usually white foreigners--engaging in fieldwork and then travelling home to write a report on the findings. To illustrate the former case, we have Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters; to illustrate the latter case, we have the life histories by Beverly Mack, Enid Schildkrout and Ivor Wilks.

Speak Out, Black Sisters is by a West African woman and is about West African women. Thiam places herself in the role of indigenous ethnographer as she travels through West Africa collecting her interviews with women. But what is the difference between a West

African woman's writings about West African women and Western ethnographers' writings about West African women? What is the effect of writing a realistic representation which will tend to be read "as a direct representation of the informant's life, as something almost equivalent to the informant's life" (Frank 72)? Questions such as these are not easily answered and have been the topic of much debate, especially within the field of anthropology, but they are crucial questions to ask because they are at the very heart of the debate surrounding the politics of representation.

Awa Thiam's "West Africanness" (for lack of a better descriptive term) and her position as a West African woman seem to give Thiam special authority regarding her research on women in West Africa. Despite the apparent advantages of the indigenous ethnographer, such a position is not wholly unproblematical. In fact, the indigenous ethnographers present a paradox for anthropology. If the "basic aim of anthropological field research is to describe the total culture of a group of people" and the "description, as much as possible, should be made from the point of view of the people ... [then it] seems obvious that the trained native anthropologist can produce the best and most reliable data, since he knows the language, has grown up in the culture, and has little difficulty in becoming involved with the people" (Jones 252). But the native or indigenous anthropologist is likely to encounter "'various communication difficulties because his subjects, members of the same society as himself, a priori put him in a definite social category in which he remains trapped, usually throughout the entire research period'" (Koentjaraningrat in Fahim and

Helmer 646).

Because Speak Out, Black Sisters does not address the dynamics of the actual research processes, any problems in communication with the informants will remain a puzzle as will any limitations of Thiam's perspective which might result from her position as indigenous ethnographer. And insofar as West Africa does not have a unified and static culture but has multiple and varied cultures, Thiam's position in each of the societies would change according to, among other factors, her tribal and ethnic affiliations. But if Thiam's text makes one thing clear, it is her great interest in publicizing, with the goal of eliminating, the widespread practices in Africa of both female circumcision and other means of controlling women's sexuality.[7]

Unlike Thiam, Beverly Mack, Enid Schildkrout and Ivor Wilks are Western-trained researchers who travel to West Africa to pursue their research and who no doubt have had to answer questions about their reasons for engaging in the representation of cultural Others in Western scholarly discourses. As I argue above, even though the life hi[illegible]ies in Romero's collection manifest varying degrees of self-reflexivity, the histories do not reveal the dynamics of the fieldwork research. Like Thiam's text, the processes by which the texts came into being remain a mystery at least within the scope of the narratives. I stress this point not to chastise the authors of the case studies and life histories--asking them to use a different mode of representation would be asking them for different texts. I stress my point to remind the readers of such texts that representations are

not as transparent as they might seem.

Although life histories and case studies do not always acknowledge the relationships between the author of the study and the informant, such relations always exist in some form. Barriers which potentially inhibit author-informant communication serve to widen the gaps in representation. Factors such as race, gender, and age all play a significant role by influencing the ways in which communication can occur. Neither Thiam's case studies nor the life histories in Romero's collection openly discusses the gaps in representation and how, if problems in communication have occurred between informant and author or author and text, these problems have been resolved. Apart from Wilks's pieced together narrative of Akyaawa Yikwan, the sole indication that there might be gaps in a representation is in Patricia Romero's "Introduction," as I have already mentioned.

Gaps in representation and the representation of female sexuality

Since representations are necessarily partial descriptions of the totality of lived experience, what to include and exclude also become embroiled in questions about the politics of representation. And two of the most frequently effaced subjects of ethnographic life writings (and, perhaps, even of life writings in general) are representations of the body and of sexuality. Authors make decisions about what to represent in and omit from the ethnographic accounts; it is thus not surprising that representations of the body and of sexuality are sometimes "missing," since representations never tell all. However, if we assume that a life writing is the virtual

equivalent of the informant's life, then we will not be likely to see beyond what has been represented and will gloss over the many unrepresented aspects of lived experience. Examining both what has been included in the representations and also what has been left out or effaced proves to be an instructive reading practice.

Awa Thiam's text, for example, takes as its subject precisely that which has been little talked about: West African female sexual oppression and the forms it takes. Although Thiam's assumptions about the transparency of language to convey unproblematically the complexities and totality of lived experience may be unduly optimistic, her book does present compelling information about the nature and practice of the control of female sexuality in West Africa.

As I have mentioned above, Thiam's decision to use mimetic representation as a vehicle for establishing both her authority as an author and the authority of the ethnographic truths is likely a political one, which, for example, flies in the face of twentieth-century theories of language which argue that meaning is indeterminate and referentiality is a fiction. To argue that texts are not able to refer to reality would amount, in the case of Thiam's text, to denying the possibility of addressing the very real practices of clitoridectomy, excision, infibulation and "the harm that results from [these acts] of sexual mutilation practised on women" (Thiam 80).

But we know from Saussure and other structuralists that referentiality is not a complete fiction; convention plays a major role in establishing connections between sign and referent, and, furthermore, between referent and meaning. We see that Speak Out,

Black Sisters fills a gap which has been glossed over for too long. One of the real achievements of Speak Out, Black Sisters is Thiam's provision of a critical analysis of clitoridectomy, and other forms of "sexual mutilation" without sensationalizing them to make them "appeal" to incredulous audiences. Certainly the information provided in the study is alarming to anyone unfamiliar with clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation, but by "giving voice" to West African women and by putting the voices in historical, cultural and religious contexts, Thiam tries to demonstrate the prevalence and destructiveness of these practices.

Speak Out, Black Sisters signals one of the major impossibilities of women's life writings: the "right," willingness or even ability to talk openly about female sexuality. Silences abound when it comes to the representation of female sexuality. Yet if female sexuality is a taboo subject, how is female sexual oppression to be eradicated? Thiam breaks this silence. Fran Hosken hails Thiam's book as the "only book, written by an African woman, that provides substantive research and information on female genital mutilation as well as personal accounts of the operations by the victims" (Hosken 52).[8]

Certainly, Thiam is not the first person to talk about clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation, but from her perspective as an indigenous feminist ethnographer, she challenges cultural relativists to re-examine the assumption that female sexual oppression is simply another manifestation of African culture which should not be colonized by Western values. She also challenges fellow Africans who

argue that such practices have religious significance or are necessary for social cohesion. Of special concern to Thiam is the number of anthropologists and others who engage in cross-cultural comparisons, especially of sexuality, without sufficient understanding of the practices they are writing about:

> This type of tit for tat argument gets us no further than any similar attempt to define our African societies by comparing them with those of Europe. But people who understand nothing of ritual practices must beware of attacking them, especially when they base their judgement on criteria which bear no relationship to the mentalities of people in the society under consideration.
>
> The women of Black Africa have suffered enough from these colonial and neo-colonial attitudes. Let us have no more of them! This applies particularly to ethnologists, anthropologists, colonialists and neo-colonialists. (80)

Thiam employs ethnographic research methods for gathering evidence with which to counter the representations of West Africans generated by "ethnologists, anthropologists, colonialists and neo-colonialists" who espouse "colonial or neo-colonial attitudes." Her political, feminist agenda is by no means hidden in Speak Out, Black Sisters. And for this reason, Thiam's book serves as a useful benchmark according to which I shall examine the representations of female sexuality as they arise or are effaced in the works I will discuss in the chapters to come. Again, I should emphasize that it is not my intention to judge a text's worth according to the presence or absence of representations of sexuality, nor for that matter according to the presence or absence of discussions of the dynamics of fieldwork research. I do, however, want to argue that the search for representations of sexuality and for authors' rhetorical strategies

are possible entrances into a discussion of the gaps in and the politics of representation.

Reading strategies

The problems with representation outlined in this chapter constitute what has been called a "crisis in representation." As might be expected, there have been many different responses to the crisis. Clifford Geertz presents one such response:

> The disarray may not be permanent, because the anxieties that provoke it may prove masterable with a clearer recognition of their proper origin.... Once ethnographic texts begin to be looked <u>at</u> as well as through, once they are seen to be made, and made to persuade, those who make them have rather more to answer for. Such a situation may initially alarm, producing back-to-the-facts table thumping in the establishment and will-to-power gauntlet throwing in its adversaries. But it can, given tenacity enough and courage, be gotten used to. (138)

However, if we simply get used to the fact that there are problems with mimeticism, then we may become complacent about trying to discover what these problems entail for life histories and case studies rooted in the realist tradition.

The perceived crises in textual representations operate at every level of the production and interpretation of texts: from the interviewing process, which likely involves inequalities in the power of researcher and informant, to the inclusion and exclusion of certain materials in the life history, to the assumptions the reader makes about the nature of the textual representations. These crises, however, need not be debilitating.

The adoption of reading strategies which will take into account

the various problems posed by realistic representation affords one way to negotiate the complexities of representations. It seems clear to me that readers gain knowledge about subjects through reading; the question remains, what is the order of this knowledge? What is the order of meaning generated from texts? How we interpret life writings is inextricably bound to the assumptions we make about the ability of language to represent lived experience. And, as Gelya Frank persuasively argues, not enough attention has been paid to reading strategies. Frank explains the importance of readers in this way:

> The common denominator afforded by the life history is an appeal to the person, the whole person, below or prior to anthropological issues or other specialized concerns.... More primary is the connection made by the reader through identification (transference) in the psychological sense used by Freud and [through] empathy ... fleshing out the character in the story with appropriate feelings, when the reader's own experience permits this positive identification to take place. (73-74)

Reading strategies play a very important role in determining what order of knowledge we acquire from texts, and the strategy which I have adopted in this first chapter entails looking at the realistic ethnographic representations for not only what is represented, but also for what is excluded. I can never know <u>everything</u> about the women whose life histories I have discussed above; this does not mean I cannot know <u>anything</u> about them.

Awa Thiam's <u>Speak Out, Black Sisters</u> attempts to transparently represent the realities of many women in West African societies. Thiam uses realism as a strategy for her political moves, and she explicitly depends upon the realist tradition to supply legitimacy and

authority to her writing because, it seems to me, that authoritatively addressing the topic of clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation necessitates a discourse which can proclaim the truth of its representations. Similarly, the life historians Beverly Mack, Enid Schildkrout, and Ivor Wilks rely on mimeticism to carry the weight of the ethnographic "truths" which they present in celebration and recognition of the women whose lives they (re)present.

As an active reader, I find it useful to question my own assumptions about texts and to examine the assumptions underlying the texts I read, which in this chapter consisted in ethnographic accounts rooted in the realist tradition. Chapter Two will explore the assumptions that I make as a reader of a highly problematical text, a realistic autobiographical ethnography; it will also examine what assumptions the author seems to be making about her own writing project.

Notes

1. Gelya Frank also discusses the possibilities of misunderstandings arising from researcher/informant relationships. See Frank, esp. 84, and Langness and Frank, "Section II: Methods," esp. 34-40 and 43-53.

2. See also Personal Narratives Group, Interpreting Women's Lives 201-203 for a discussion of authorship and the role of interpreters and narrators of life stories.

3. The complexities of ethnographic representations will come up again in more detail in my discussion in Chapter Two of the autobiographical ethnography, Return to Laughter by Elenore Smith Bowen [Laura Bohannan].

4. The cover of Thiam's book carries the title "Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa"; however, all the page headers say "Speak Out, Black Sisters" as does the British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data entry. Thus, I have chosen to refer to the book using the latter title.

5. Speak Out, Black Sisters contains many silences regarding the whole issue of translation and transcription. First, Thiam does not state in what languages her interviews took place in--Wolof, Ewe, Akan, French, English, etc. Secondly, Thiam does not address the process of transcription, the preparation of manuscripts from the taped (?) interviews or from Thiam's notes from the interviews. Thirdly, and this closely relates to the second point, Thiam does not specify the nature of the French text. For example, if the interviews were conducted in a language other than French were they transcribed for Thiam's manuscript before or after they were translated into French? And fourthly, Dorothy Blair does not discuss anywhere in Speak Out, Black Sisters how she approached translating Thiam's original French text. Since both Thiam and Blair remain silent about the process of translation, many questions go unanswered. For example, does Thiam conduct any interviews in English later translating them into French for her book? If so, does Blair re-translate the interviews into English, or does she follow the transcription of the original interview?

6. Schildkrout mentions that she had an assistant during one of her trips to Nigeria. She and Carol Gelber interviewed Husaina together. See 81, 89.

7. According to the "Postscript" (published in 1983) to Fran Hosken's The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females (3rd revised edition), in 1983 Thiam was the Co-ordinator of Le Mouvement Femmes et Sociétés, the Dakar section of the International Commission Against Sexual Mutilation ("Postscript" 17). Thiam was the organizer of an international conference, sponsored by Le Mouvement Femmes et Sociétés, which marked the "first time that FCGM [female

castration/genital mutilation] was discussed at a public meeting in Dakar" ("Postscript" 10).

8. There are, no doubt, many more books written by African women that deal with the practices of genital mutilation in Africa. One very interesting recent study of which I am aware is Dr. Olayinka Koso-Thomas's The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication (London: Zed Books, 1987).

Chapter 2: When Fact is Fiction, or When Fiction is Fact

> Indeed I was a stranger here. Perhaps I would always be a stranger. No matter how much they told me, they would withhold something. No matter how deep I went, there would always be something underneath.
> - Elenore Smith Bowen [Laura Bohannan], Return to Laughter 43

Autobiography and the representation of cultural Others

As we have seen in the last chapter, mimetic ethnographic representation is not as straightforward as it at first appears to be. Far from transparently representing lives, realistic ethnographic life writings beg questions not only about the ability of language to adequately represent lived experience, but also about the ability and even the right of ethnographers to reconstruct individual lives. The life-author-text-reader gaps which inevitably exist in representations are effaced or masked in realistic ethnographies. How to deal with these gaps constitutes what has been called the "crisis in anthropology" (Clifford, "Introduction" 3) or more generally the "crisis in representation."[1]

To compensate for the alleged transparency of the ethnographies examined in the last chapter, I explored a reading strategy which would call attention to the gaps in representation in an effort to debunk the notion that a representation can equal a life. This reading strategy emphasized the potential barriers to communication and also the politics of ethnographers' representations of their own societies and of cultural Others. Such a reading strategy, however, is useful primarily for texts which either outwardly proclaim their

transparency or implicitly rely on the purchase of realistic representation. But what happens if ethnographers use writing strategies that highlight the gaps in representation and that problematize beliefs in the self-evidency of meaning?

Anthropologists and other social scientists have adopted many different approaches to writing and interpreting ethnographies in order to deal with the crises in representation. One of these approaches presents a life history as an "autobiography,"[2] that is, as an accurate self-representation constructed by the informant and only documented or transcribed by the ethnographer. One example of this first approach, the "as-told-to"[3] story, is the "autobiography" of Nongenile Masithathu Zenani presented by Harold Scheub in Life Histories of African Women: "This autobiography was taped on 3 August 1972, under a grove of lemon trees, near Mrs Zenani's home in Gatyana District, the Transkei. The audience consisted of five Xhosa women. The English translation is by Harold Scheub" (Scheub 12). Although "as-told-to" stories are often treated by anthropologists as autobiographies, they involve significantly different relationships among life, author, text and reader/listener than do "traditional" autobiographies (i.e., in which authors explicitly engage in textual self-representation). The "as-told-to" story involves an original (oral) telling which is transcribed and is (often) translated into another language.

However, "life history," as the term is most frequently used, refers to biographical portraits of subjects' lives. These biographical sketches, however, are often read as "autobiographies,"

as stories told by the subjects themselves. But conceptualizing life histories as "autobiographies" takes a slightly different form when we consider that "it is to the investigator's personal experiences that the subject's accounts are first referred" (Frank 89). Gelya Frank urges us not to forget that the process of documenting life histories involves the participation of two consciousnesses: those of both the informant and the researcher. "Speaking somewhat metaphorically, the life history can be considered a double autobiography" (89). Frank continues:

> Many researchers are now consciously drawing on their own selves through autobiographical writing, opening insights into the process of self-construction that are not available when an investigator's object in producing a life history is primarily to listen and record. (89)

Frank presents a second way of looking at the autobiographical elements of life history writing. In this case, the life history is seen as autobiographical of the informant and of the researcher.

We now have two models for conceptualizing the conjunction of ethnographic life history and autobiography: one emphasizes the autobiographical information imparted by the informant; the other emphasizes the dual nature of a life history, as "autobiographical" of both researcher and informant. But postmodern anthropologists present us with a third model for viewing the conjunction. This model also draws attention to autobiographical aspects of life history documents; this time, however, a life history is envisioned as autobiographical not primarily of the informant, but of the author--or at least of the author's situation during the research process.

Trying to compensate for the problems with fieldwork situations by exposing them in the ethnographic accounts, postmodern anthropologists experiment with ways of writing and interpreting life histories that will emphasize the politics of representation in order to respond to the perceived "crisis in representation." Many anthropologists now shy away from the notion that cultural Others can be represented transparently and espouse the belief that "rigorous self-awareness" (Stacey 26) is an essential component of the generation of ethnographies that try to avoid the problems created by mimetic representations of cultural Others.

These "self-reflexive 'fieldwork account[s]'" (Clifford, "Introduction" 14) that attempt to reveal the dynamics of fieldwork situations and that do not completely efface the gaps in the transition from lived experience to textual representation have emerged as a new "subgenre of ethnographic writing" (14). In this new subgenre,

> Different textual strategies are attempted.... With the "fieldwork account" the rhetoric of experienced objectivity yields to that of the autobiography and the ironic self-portrait.... The ethnographer, a character in a fiction, is at center stage. He or she can speak of previously "irrelevant" topics: violence and desire, confusions, struggles and economic transactions with informants. (14)

Furthermore, Clifford states, "It has become clear that every version of an 'other,' wherever found, is also the construction of a 'self,' and the making of ethnographic texts ... has always involved a process of 'self-fashioning'" (23-24). This third model for viewing the conjunction between ethnography and autobiography thus emphasizes

ethnographic accounts' autobiographical elements.

The contribution of postmodern anthropology to the analysis of life writings does not limit itself to finding new ways of understanding the relation between autobiography and ethnography. Postmodern anthropologists stress the role of writing in the construction of ethnographic accounts, and they argue that since objective, scientific accounts are an impossibility, any problems encountered in the ethnographic research process should be openly represented in the fieldwork account thereby exposing the limitations of ethnographic research and life writing.

New writing and interpretive strategies will help debunk the myth that "pure" mimeticism is possible and that ethnographies transparently document lived experience. James Clifford contends that the objective authority of the ethnographer is a fiction and states that, in fact, all

> Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of "something made or fashioned" ... But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real.... Interpretive social scientists have recently come to view good ethnographies as "true fictions." (6)

As well, ethnographies are fictional since they reify or freeze in time continually changing structures and relationships. Because "'Cultures' do not hold still for their portraits" (10), any attempt to make them do so will "always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power

relationship" (10). Ethnographers necessarily create fictions when they reify a culture or a life.

There is, however, a danger in treating ethnographies as fictions. Because of the crisis in representation and because ethnographers are becoming increasingly aware of the politics of representation, some postmodern anthropologists become sceptical about their abilities (and "rights") to (re)present cultural Others. This scepticism prompts Clifford and others to believe that ethnographers do not "represent" cultures: they "invent" or construct them (Clifford, "Introduction" 2, 11-12). Postmodern anthropologist Stephen Tyler, for example, asserts that anthropologists should stop trying to "represent" cultural Others and start trying to "evoke" them: "The whole point of 'evoking' rather than 'representing' is that it frees ethnography from mimesis" (130, his emphasis).

> Evocation is neither presentation nor representation. It presents no objects and represents none, yet it makes available through absence what can be conceived but not presented. It is thus beyond truth and immune to the judgment of performance. It overcomes the separation of the sensible and the conceivable, of form and content, of self and other, of language and the world. (123)

However useful attempts to "evoke" rather than "represent" may be, Tyler's suggestions are problematic on two counts. First, evocation does not get away from the problem of representation; it may disassociate itself from mimesis (as Tyler obviously wishes to do) but evocation is simply another type of representation. Mimesis is an impossibility for Tyler because in "ethnography there are no 'things' there to be the objects of a description ... there is rather a

discourse, and that too, no thing ..." (130, 131). Evocation constitutes a way of maintaining a belief that an immediacy of experience can be communicated (similar to the project of mimesis) but with the obvious difference that evocation displaces the referent and founds itself on "absence." Reliance on the ability of evocation to "make available ... what can be conceived but not presented" is a gesture back toward Leavis' idea that language can convey an immediacy of experience, that language is embodied.

Secondly, Tyler's emphasis on evocation rather than on mimesis derives from his belief that the former moves "beyond truth and [is] immune to the judgment of performance." Such a claim about the nature of one's ethnographies is very problematic, especially at a time of heightened awareness of the need for authorial accountability for ethnographic representations. Jonathan Friedman, in his analysis of postmodern anthropological trends, disavows the usefulness of some postmodern beliefs: "If alterity is the constitutive act of self-definition, and if we cannot objectify the selves and others of our own little world, then all knowledge, all communication is mere chimera. Not only anthropology, but all knowledge falls into the black hole of solipsism" (167). And according to Friedman, postmodern anthropologists' intense self-scrutiny sometimes leads them down Solipsist Alley. While it should be noted that Stephen Tyler does not speak for all postmodern anthropologists, Friedman's cautions seem to be aimed at anthropologists like Tyler who, working around some difficult problems in ethnology, manage to create others that are potentially more dangerous.

Whatever the particular writing strategies adopted by postmodern anthropologists, two beliefs persist: namely, that ethnographic accounts are "fictions," and that the process of representing a cultural Other posits an authorial Self. Putting these beliefs about postmodern ethnographical texts together, we come up with what I take to be a description of the paradigmatic postmodern ethnography: a work that is autobiographical fact[4] and ethnographic fiction. Such a work would be autobiographical fact insofar as the anthropologist is self-reflective and the narrative, self-reflexive about the process of conducting fieldwork research and about writing strategies.[5] And it would be ethnographic fiction insofar as anthropologists invent cultures and can only present "partial truths" not solid objective facts about a culture. According to these criteria, Elenore Smith Bowen's Return to Laughter (1954) is a paradigmatic postmodern ethnography.

Return to Laughter and types of representation

Whereas the texts discussed in Chapter One appear on the surface to be relatively unproblematic realistic ethnographies, Return to Laughter is, on the surface, quite problematical: it is both ethnography and autobiography, both fiction and fact. Subtitled "An Anthropological Novel," Return to Laughter is marketed as "anthropology/fiction," yet the book is also a factual document of the author's fieldwork among the Tiv of northern Nigeria. The "Author's Note" exposes these different stories about the text. On the one hand, Bohannan states:

> All the characters in this book, except myself, are fictitious in the fullest meaning of that word.... Here I have written simply as a human being, and the truth I have tried to tell concerns the sea change in oneself that comes from immersion in another and savage culture. (my emphasis)

And on the other hand,

> I knew people of the type I have described .... The tribe I have described here does exist.... The ethnographic background given here is accurate, but it is neither complete nor technical.

These two passages reveal the various orders (ethnography, autobiography) of representation at play and also the factual-fictional tension in the book. Return to Laughter is autobiographical fact and ethnographic fiction: a paradigm of the poetics of postmodern ethnographic life writing. Oddly enough, this paradigmatic postmodern ethnography was written by a woman 15 to 20 years before postmodern anthropological theorists shifted into high gear.[6]

In addition to the divergent signals sent by the "Author's Note" regarding the types of representation to be found in Return to Laughter, the "Foreward" by David Riesman also sends signals which seemingly conflict with what I would expect of the text having read only the covers. According to Riesman, the book is not, as its subtitle and classifications suggest, a fictional ethnographic novel, but is an autobiography--or, at least, is an autobiographical fiction (xvi, xviii). And, the name "Elenore Smith Bowen," the pseudonym of Laura Bohannan, provides us with another example of fictional constructs working in and on the text.

Regardless of the professed fictional constructs, Bohannan's

"Author's Note" attempts to spell out the degree of truthfulness of the autobiographical fiction. Bohannan presents a self-reflective fieldwork account which reveals one of the main problems faced by realistic descriptions of cultural Others: lived experience in its totality cannot be represented and perhaps cannot even be known, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests: "No matter how deep I went [searching for information], there would always be something underneath." Bohannan recognizes the fictions involved in attempting to understand a culture "from the point of view of the people--i.e., the inside view" (Jones 252). The truths Bohannan's text recounts are "partial truths" or fictions. But the truths are also factual in the sense that (if we are to believe Bohannan) the representations are "true" to her experience of the fieldwork situation.

Even before I begin to read Return to Laughter, I face conflicting "facts" about the nature of the representations I should expect. This book is a far cry from traditional realistic ethnographies of Chapter One. However, once I begin to read Return to Laughter, I quickly realize that the textual representations are grounded in the realist tradition.

Sorting out the facts and fictions

In my first chapter, because the textual representations in Speak Out, Black Sisters and Life Histories of African Women purport to be so unproblematical, I "problematized" them in order to examine what relations they efface and what the effects of effacement are. In Bohannan's book, the status of the representations (of both herself

and the tribe) is so problematical already, it would help to sort them out. I will begin by focusing on the author's self-representation.

The most visible incongruity besetting the text is Bohannan's use of a pseudonym. As a professional social scientist, Bohannan's reputation might have been seriously challenged (perhaps jeopardized) had she published the book under her real name (Riesman xvi; Arana 30). Carolyn Heilbrun, commenting on her own experience publishing detective novels under the name Amanda Cross, states concerns which Bohannan probably had as well: "the practical reasons for writing under a pseudonym were clear. One had one's 'real' identity, and if one chose to indulge in frivolities, however skilful, one did it under another name than that reserved for proper scholarship" (110).

For the social scientists of the 1950s and 60s, particularly those engaged in gathering data on other cultures, professional competence and objectivity were highly valued (Riesman, xvi; Clifford, "Introduction" 13), and the traditional realistic account was the culmination of the research project. "Writing [was] reduced to method: keeping good field notes, making accurate maps, and 'writing up' results" (Clifford, "Introduction" 2). Bohannan's text can hardly be considered "scientific" in the sense I have just described. She admits that her representations of the tribe are "neither complete nor technical" ("Author's Note"), and her account of the Tiv is never visibly divorced from her (subjective) experiences. A traditional scientific text would have removed overt references to the subjective nature of the fieldwork, and had Bohannan chosen to write a scientific text, she would not likely have mentioned, for example, her lack of

control over the rate at which her informants provide her with information (38). A "scientific" text of the 1960s would be likely to call attention to the fieldwork situation only insofar as narrative self-reflexivity would strengthen the author's authority (cf. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority" 26; Rabinow 244). As R. Victoria Arana observes, in the 1960s, when Return to Laughter

> was first published, the taboo against writing ethnography in the first-person was still in full force. Indeed, ethnography was being written in the 'ethnographic present,' which de facto proscribed the production of history or of self-reflexive, autobiographical narrative. (30)

Arana's claim about the "taboo" of first-person ethnographies seems to contradict the comment made by Clifford in his introduction to Writing Culture that the use of the first-person was "never banned from ethnographies" (14), but as I see it, they can both be right. Clifford's comment that the first-person was never literally legislated out of ethnography is likely so, but Arana points out that subjective accounts do not display sufficient objectivity and, therefore, are not scientific enough to be published as "true" ethnographic accounts. This "problem" with narrative point of view again brings to the surface the debate mentioned in Chapter One regarding the authority of the author and the perceived status of the author in the ethnographic account. And as we saw in Chapter One, the claim to objectivity and transparency is frequently made by texts in which the author does not appear as a character in the ethnographic exchange.

The nature of the representation of the author is anything but

unproblematical in Return to Laughter, yet the actual textual representations are grounded in the realist tradition. Bohannan recognizes the gaps between the author and the informants and the informants and the personal narrative; in fact, it is these gaps which she explores in her book. But the gaps between the author and the text are depicted relatively unproblematically. The turbulence of emotions and the unease she feels about her "professional competence" (Bowen 38) are rendered in forthcoming, almost self-evident prose--a cornerstone of mimeticism:

> At the time, however, I was constantly being given apparently arbitrary advice, until I almost gagged on it, yet I was almost always sorry when I ignored it. Nor was I always able to fool myself into a feeling of professional competence. Far from pursuing a schedule of research, I was hauled around from one homestead to another .... Far from having docile informants whom I could train, I found myself the spare-time amusement of people who told me what they considered it good for me to know and what they were interested in at the moment. (38)

Bohannan "transparently" represents how much she feels like a player rather than a coach in the anthropological field; the disparity between her expectations of being "in control" and the reality of her being at the mercy of the tribe is a difficult situation which she works through in her autobiographical ethnography. Like many recent postmodern ethnographies to which Clifford refers, Return to Laughter "speak[s] of previously 'irrelevant' topics: violence and desire, confusions, struggles and economic transactions with informants" ("Introduction" 14).

Although Bohannan relies on the realist purchase to carry the weight of her ethnographic and autobiographical truths, she does at

times acknowledge the inadequacy of language to satisfactorily express herself; "I could find no words that had meaning for them [her listeners]" (283). Thus, it is wrong to suggest that Bohannan envisions her book as a completely mimetic text. Return to Laughter is grounded in a realist tradition, but it moves beyond realism in an effort to articulate the impossibilities of the truly objective observation and documentation of the experiences of cultural Others. Just as Bohannan explores the limitations of objectivity in anthropological research, so does she demonstrate the limitations which language places upon its users.

Language proves to be a central concern of Return to Laughter, and Bohannan draws explicit connections between learning the language of the Tiv and learning about their culture: "I again realized that learning the language and learning the culture were mutually dependent. I had misunderstood because I did not know the full social implications of the words" (110). Bohannan's articulation of the social nature of language demonstrates the understanding of language to which I am most partial: language and its meanings are neither completely transparent nor completely arbitrary. Rather, signs and referents, words and meanings are conventionally linked.

Not only does Bohannan draw our attention to the limitations of language (the spoken word), but she also points specifically to the inadequacy of the printed word to convey experiences and emotions. For example, when Bohannan tries to describe the tribe members' reactions to the devastating smallpox epidemic, she recalls that the (white) people at the British station where she gets her supplies

"could not understand the [tribe's] fear" (283). She continues:

> I could tell them of Amara's death [in childbirth] and make them weep. They did know what it is to watch a loved person die.... There were two people who almost understood [the fear]. Sackerton, who remembered his Pepys and his Boccaccio, but it was only from the printed page that he knew.... The priest knew, but he could not help me. (283)

Bohannan implies that through reading we gain different knowledge of an experience than we would if we were to live the experience; otherwise it would not matter that it was "only from the printed page" that Sackerton ("the administrative official in charge of that district" [1]) could understand her feelings. The limitations of print and of experiences gained as a result of reading are really only alluded to; indeed, it would not benefit Bohannan's autobiographical and ethnographical projects to exhibit radical scepticism about the ability of language to (re)present lived experience, for then she would be committed to the view that her book could impart no meaningful information either about herself or about cultural Others.

Therefore, in order to describe her belief in the limitations of language, whether spoken or written, Bohannan relies on a thinly veiled mimeticism--the possibility of referentiality--which admits that language is not transparent and that meanings are not self-evident. This veiled mimeticism preserves the belief that communication can occur. The last section of this chapter will address the necessity of assuming the possibility of, at least, a problematized version of mimetic representation.

Bohannan's description of her experiences among the Tiv demonstrates the very real complexities reiterated in article after

article and book after book mentioning the process of fieldwork.[7] One of the problems facing postmodern anthropology's persistent demands for self-reflective writing strategies is captured in a passage of Return to Laughter which I will quote at length. The problem to which I refer is the tension between objectivity and subjectivity: the tension between trying to view oneself objectively (i.e., being rigorously self-reflective, "see[ing one's] own naked being") while admitting the impossibility of objectivity in the observation of others.[8]

In the following passage, Bohannan has just returned to the tribe, having beat (what she thinks is) a hasty retreat before the smallpox epidemic reaches the Tiv community. The surviving members of the tribe gradually regroup and organize a great storytelling extravaganza for Bohannan's benefit. The stories which Bohannan chooses to recount function as allegories of what she has learned about herself throughout her stay in the community. In the following passage, Bohannan ponders the changes she has undergone as a result of her fieldwork experiences and about the modifications she has had to make in the actual process of ethnographic research. Ikpoom is one of the chief's sons and one of the best story-tellers in the village:

> Ikpoom sang for Agundu, for the grinning skeleton of the world that underlies all illusion. One can ignore Agundu. But those who follow him may never return, for they have seen and can never forget.
>
> No, I could not forget. I had followed Agundu. My soul's protest was so deep that I nearly cried aloud: I can look on Agundu, on reality, unafraid, but I cannot see my own naked being. I had followed science out here, as one follows a will-o'-the-wisp, seeing only what beckoned from the distance, paying no heed to the earth I spurned beneath my feet, seeing naught about me. I had served anthropology well. Notebook upon

> notebook, good stuff, and accurate, and I had the knowledge to work it soundly so that I might stand, with a craftsman's pride, before the finished work and say, "This is mine."
>
> I had followed Agundu. There was no jury, no god, before whom I could stand unashamed to say, "This is me." Me, as I sat there, the product of my pettiness and my cowardice. But not I. I was still unfinished, could still change, could still return.... (289, her emphasis)

Bohannan admits that she was wrong when she naively believed that fieldwork was going to be easy and just a matter of good record-keeping and objective observation. She "served anthropology well." She made her notes, but she also learned that "Whatever the merits of anthropology to the world or of my work to anthropology, this experience had wrought many changes in me as a human being--and I had thought that what wasn't grist for my notebooks would be adventure" (290). The adventure turns out to be autobiographical "fiction" in which Bohannan traces the "sea change" in herself. The tensions among the "requirement" that the anthropologist be an objective observer, the impossibility of fulfilling this role, and the requisite "objective" self-observation receive a significant amount of examination in what I take to be a paradigmatic postmodern ethnographical text. As Bohannan recognizes, acting as an observer of cultural Others is vastly different from and equally problematical to acting as an observer of oneself.

The second crisis in representation in Return to Laughter is the status of the representation of the (unnamed)' Tiv tribe. Bohannan claims in the "Author's Note" that the tribe does exist and the "ethnographic background is accurate," and yet the characters

themselves are "fictitious." I will take her at her word and assume that even though the characters are not themselves signs to which there are definitive referents, the relations amongst the characters "reveal essential truths" (Langness and Frank 119). So given that the characters are not necessarily "true" to life, what is the status of knowledge I gain from Bohannan's text? What can I learn specifically about West African women from the "fictional" accounts?

When Bohannan first arrives in the community she is greeted by Kako (the chief), two of his seventeen wives and a group of (male) elders. Bohannan makes a project of learning the names of the members of the tribe. She asks and is told the names of the males, but when she asks the names of the two women present, she is ignored by the men. The women just smile. Why might this be? What interpretations suggest themselves for this scenario? Do the men not think it important that Bohannan learn the women's names? Not necessarily, because, as Bohannan later learns, women's names are a complicated affair (Bowen 45-46); situations are not always as straightforward as they might at first appear. This incident concerning women's names serves as a reminder to Bohannan that the "obviousness" of situations often proves to be misleading.

From the beginning of her fieldwork Bohannan realizes that some of her impressions, especially of West African women, are faulty. Just as Mary Kingsley, more than 50 years earlier, had "read up" on and made inquiries about West Africa,[10] Bohannan does the same. Bohannan also realizes that missionaries' representations of the women were misleading: "I began to wonder where I could find the oppressed,

downtrodden women described by the missionaries. All those I had met were as stubborn and intractable as they looked. Just the same I liked them--especially Atakpa, who was my age and merry" (34).

Although Bohannan relates her interest in learning about the women of the tribe, most of the information that she "professionally" sets out to collect is "in the hands of the men" (78). This disturbs her because, as she says, "I was rapidly being absorbed in the life of the women and children. All the magic, all the law, all the politics--over half the things professionally important to me--were in the hands of the men, and so far not one man had been willing to discuss such matters with me" (78).

Bohannan's text delineates problems which a female anthropologist might encounter trying to access the wisdom of the male members of the society. As a woman, Bohannan is relegated to the female realm and is separated from her potential informants (the men). She eventually overcomes this gender-barrier, partially "by virtue of [her] occupational role and the kind of assertiveness it allows [her]" (Riesman xvi).[11] But, perhaps, more importantly, her access to both women's and men's knowledge has to do with her status as a <u>white</u> foreigner.[12] Because she is female, the men deem her as unfit for "men's" knowledge (213); as a <u>white</u> woman who must first prove her intellectual strength, she finally gains access to what is professionally important (237).

<u>Return to Laughter</u> is interesting not only because it is a paradigmatic postmodern ethnography written over 15 years before

postmodern anthropology came into full swing, but also because it is by a female anthropologist who presents information about the Tiv and demonstrates subtleties in the relationships among the Tiv women that would have been inaccessible to male anthropologists. In one scene, during a weeding party, Bohannan has an opportunity to talk to Udama, Kako's senior wife. One of Kako's younger wives, Ticha, has recently been caught committing adultery, and Udama's new daughter-in-law asks what will happen to Ticha when Kako finds out. "Udama looked severe, like the unrelenting arbiter of manners and morals I knew her" (133). Udama "painted a gloomy picture of beatings, admonitions and marital disfavour [and ended with] ... an emphatic lecture on wifely duties in principle and detail" (133), then sent off her daughter-in-law to do more weeding.

Alarmed, Bohannan very cautiously asks Udama if what she told her daughter-in-law would really happen. The next story Udama tells, "didn't match the Udama I knew" (134). Very thoughtfully Udama says what Ticha did was "'a bad thing, yet ... Kako is an old man.... I am a woman; my heart cannot blame Ticha'" (134).[13] Had Bohannan been a male anthropologist, Udama would probably not have shared such information her. In fact, a male anthropologist would not have been actively engaged in a weeding party, since men were "banned" from even coming near the women in the field (75). Judging from Bohannan's narrative, the Personal Narratives Group's assertion that life writings "are potentially rich sources for the exploration of the process of gendered self-identity" (5) proves to be an apt description of what I can learn from Bohannan's insights into her own situation as

a fieldworker in Northern Nigeria and into the situations of the Tiv women.

There is one more example of the representation of the Tiv women that I want to explore. In this scene, a group of young men in Bohannan's presence discuss their attitudes toward women. Again the conversation concerns a woman who was caught committing adultery. (This incident of adultery is different from the one noted above.) Bohannan asks: "'You mean, a man doesn't divorce his wife for adultery?'" One of the men replies: "'Of course not .... Do you give away a chair because someone else uses it? The bad thing about lovers is that they tempt wives to run away. A man lets his wife go willingly only if she is lazy'" (99). This tone of conversation continues, and Bohannan offers plaintively to the reader: "I had to hear my sex thoroughly trounced and defamed" (99). The only commonality, it seems, between the females' and the males' attitudes is that it is unfortunate when lovers are caught (98, 134). Like the women, the men talk quite freely to Bohannan about adultery and about attitudes toward women. The assumption that the Tiv women can relate at some level to Bohannan by virtue of the fact that they are all "gendered female" is probable, though not unproblematic. Why, then, do the Tiv men talk so freely--and disparagingly--about women in the presence of a woman? The thought comes to mind that since Bohannan is foreign and racially Other she is not seen by the Tiv men as a "woman" in the sense that the Tiv women are "women." Thus, as Riesman states in his "Foreward": "Return to Laughter ... illustrates, for example, the advantages women can sometimes have in field work because they

have access to all the private worlds of women as a member of their sex, and they are able to penetrate such male worlds as magic and statecraft by virtue of their occupational role ..." (xvi).

Although the characters are fictitious, I have been assuming that the relations amongst the characters are depicted accurately. As an ethnographic account, then, Return to Laughter allows us to piece together the various sets of relations among Tiv women and men; for example, I learn that women and men differ in the way they regard certain customs and "improprieties" (eg. adultery). All representations, of course, are filtered through Bohannan's consciousness, and the representations of Tiv women on which I chose to focus involve varying perceptions of sexuality. Bohannan alludes to but does not directly address the subject of female sexuality in Return to Laughter, and this omission marks a gap in Bohannan's representations of both herself and the Tiv womenm but for my purposes I will speak only to the latter. This gap in Bohannan's representation of the Tiv women is highlighted by the juxtaposition of Speak Out, Black Sisters and Return to Laughter.

The representation of female sexuality

Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters casts a shadow over gaps in representations of West African women, since it presents compelling information about the control of female sexuality through the practices of clitoridectomy, infibulation, excision, institutionalized polygamy and sexual initiation. How then am I to view the women (re)presented in Return to Laughter? The questions which I will pose

in this section do not necessarily have answers, but they are important as questions.

Bohannan comments on the unnecessary pain boys suffer during the circumcision ceremony she witnesses (259-263), but not once does she hint that women must go through a ceremony more debilitating. Maybe the Tiv do not practice female circumcision--clitoridectomy, etc. Reading Bohannan's book provides no definite answers. Thus, I am left with a nagging question: does Bohannan witness or even ask about such personal and political topics as female circumcision and sexual initiation? If she does gather such information, why does she not write about it? Perhaps she is, as she intimates, too busy tracking down the professionally important details about magic, politics and the law to look into the more "private" issues of the control of female sexuality.

Return to Laughter corroborates Thiam's references to practices among West African peoples such as polygamy and skin whitening.[14] Bohannan's comments about polygamy are usually very "matter-of-fact." And at one point she satirically considers the possible reception of Jane Eyre among the members of the tribe: "I wondered briefly what on earth a polygamous people who ideally had several wives would make of Jane's objections to bigamy" (102).[15] Bohannan does not approve of polygamy, yet she does not condemn the Tiv for the practice either; rather, she takes a relativist approach to the practice. She does not try to make the Tiv change but "accepts" the practice as one of their traditional customs which, for her, identifies them as cultural Others (131).

Bohannan's references to the practice of skin whitening are very tantalizing because she mentions them only in passing. Although she notes that it is only women who whiten their skin (18, 113), Bohannan does not expand upon possible sets of relations which might produce and promote a desire for "whiter" skin. Thiam, however, addresses precisely these sets of relations (104-109).

Female circumcision is not mentioned at all in Return to Laughter--even though Bohannan has ample opportunity to witness the effects of such practices (trouble in childbirth, with infections, etc.). She witnesses the first marriage of one of the chief's sons (and observes that the new bride is kept in seclusion for one week); she sees a birth which results in the mother's (and baby's) death. Does female circumcision play a role in either of these events? Why is the bride kept in seclusion for one week? Is the mother's death in childbirth a result of complications which stem from, for example, having her labia sewn together? I may be making more of this issue than is warranted. It is somehow not too surprising that discussions of female sexuality are effaced in Return to Laughter given the book's temporal and disciplinary contexts: between 1949 and 1953, when Bohannan did most of her fieldwork, her primary concerns (as stated in Return to Laughter) were the gathering of information about the traditional anthropological interests in law, (public) politics and community organization, and kinship systems.

We should note, however, that not drawing specific attention to sexuality is not tantamount to saying that sexuality plays no role in interpersonal relationships, since representations cannot tell all.

Rather, representations should be read not only for what they describe, but also for what they leave out. Thus, Return to Laughter should not be condemned for omitting explicit discussions of sexuality; we should, however, be aware of the lived experience of sexuality in such unrepresented relations.

Clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation are most often addressed in medical journals and are discussed primarily as health issues, and so feminists often make light of the justifications given for such practices:

> Women championing many of the cultural practices adopted by their communities do not realize that some of the practices they promote were designed to subjugate them, and more importantly, to control their sexuality and to maintain male chauvinistic attitudes in respect of marital and sexual relations. (Koso-Thomas 1)

That such subjugating practices continue to be a problem for women is of concern to people like Awa Thiam, Fran Hosken, Olayinka Koso-Thomas, and Pat Caplan who, according to their various disciplinary and political interests, address the manifestations of various cultural controls of female sexuality. For the reason that issues relating to the control of female sexuality do not often surface outside of medical and feminist discourses in general ethnographic accounts such as Bohannan's, I think the practices discussed at length in Thiam's text merit mentioning again; acknowledged or not, sexuality is an important factor in interpersonal relationships.

Reading strategies

Different modes of representation require different reading strategies, and the "chosen" reading strategy will affect the knowledge I gain from a text. Attempting to sort out the orders (autobiography, ethnography) of representation and the fact-fiction tensions in Return to Laughter is a difficult business, but much depends on it. Do I read Return to Laughter as a "pure" autobiography--for what it reveals about the author's life? Do I read it as a "pure" ethnography--for what it reveals about the Tiv as Bohannan actually "found" them? Do I read Return to Laughter as completely fictional or a combination of fact and fiction? Technically, I could read the text in all of these ways, and in each case I would come away from my reading with different interpretations of the text.

The question is, how should I read the text? I have stated that Return to Laughter is a paradigmatic postmodern ethnography because it explicitly embodies the recent trends in postmodern ethnographic writing--namely, to identify the author of the narrative and to make known the dynamics of research situations. Although Bohannan refers to the occasional inadequacy of language to (re)present reality, Return to Laughter relies on the conception of a somewhat problematized mimeticism and on the authority of the realist tradition to convey the complexities of ethnographic research. As we see in the epigraph to this chapter, Bohannan admits to the unlikelihood that she will ever know all there is to know about the Tiv; she also suggests that even if she could, she would be unable to tell all. In other

words, she does not posit "an ideology of transparency and immediacy of experience" (Clifford, "Introduction" 2).

But can we insist on the efficacy of representation without harbouring a belief in mimeticism? One alternative to mimeticism, as I explained earlier, is evocation, but this does not take us away from the problems with representation. W.J.T. Mitchell's characterization of representation is helpful here because he asks us to remember that representation "always exacts some cost in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy" (21). We can read representations for what they tell us about an individual or event, but we can also recognize that readings are contingent upon many factors: we may read misrepresentations; we may misinterpret what we read; the list of barriers to communication between the author and the reader is long indeed. Rather than getting myself caught in critical sparring matches, I have chosen to work under the assumption that I believe the authors make about their own texts: that their life writings have the capacity to refer to real lives and, further, that the life writings do in fact refer to those lives. Ultimately, I am responsible for "getting at" the meaning(s) of any text I read, and therefore can be held responsible for my reading and theorizing. Further discussion of these points will be left to my Conclusion.

Through the reading strategy employed in this chapter, I have explored the various orders of representation and the tension between the factual and fictional information in Return to Laughter. I have read Laura Bohannan's text for what the representations will tell me

about the ways in which she coped with her fieldwork in Northern Nigeria; I have also tried to be sensitive to what the representations leave out. Sheer practicality dictates that an author cannot tell everything there is to tell about a particular individual or event; conscious and unconscious decisions about what to include in and exclude from representations must be made.

Return to Laughter is a mixed bag of orders and modes of representation. It is, therefore, a difficult text to "pin down." While I share post-structuralist scepticism of both the transparency of language and the belief in realistic representation, I do not share the post-structuralist belief in the "suspension" or decentring of the referent. The authors of the life writings discussed in Chapters One and Two hold in common the basic assumption that their narratives refer to real people. Awa Thiam, Beverly Mack, Enid Schildkrout, Ivor Wilks and Laura Bohannan do not question whether the people they write about really exist or whether the informants' (and in Wilks's case, the subject's) lives can be linguistically represented. These authors also, to varying degrees, rely on the tradition of realistic representation (even given realism's problems) to carry the weight of their ethnographic and autobiographical truths. I can also say the same about the beliefs purported by authors of the life writings to be discussed in Chapter Three: Buchi Emecheta and Nafissatou Diallo do not call into question their individual identities, nor do they appear to be sceptical about their personal abilities (and the ability of language) to (re)present their lived experiences.

Correspondences between real lives and the textual

representations of real lives may be fraught with problems potentially affecting all of the terms participating in the construction of a representation: the "real" life of the informant, the author, the personal narrative and the reader. And it is the task of the reader to sort out and interpret the representations which a text proffers.

Notes

1. The crisis in representation has been approached from many different angles. Within literary critical theory see, for example, Paul Smith, Discerning the Subject, and Jean-François Lyotard, The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. See also Edward Said ("Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors") for a discussion of the anthropological project "within the context provided by the history of imperialism" (224).

Within postmodern anthropology, two texts stand out: James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography and George Marcus and Michael Fischer, Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences. For critiques of the way postmodern anthropology grapples with the crisis in representation consult: Jonathan Friedman's Marxist critique ("Beyond Otherness or: The Spectacularization of Anthropology" and Frances Mascia-Lees et al. "The Postmodern Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective."

2. See, for example, Harold Scheub in Life Histories of African Women, Patricia Romero, ed. L.L. Langness and Gelya Frank also refer to this practice in Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography, 89-90. Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters also presents the voices of West African women as mini-"autobiographies." The women "speak for themselves."

3. See Gretchen M. Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands, "American Indian Women's Narratives: The Literary Tradition," American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives 1-26. See especially 10-13 for a discussion of the "as-told-to" form of life writing.

4. There are, of course, many problems with the notion of an "autobiographical fact." Paul John Eakin and Sidonie Smith, in two recent studies of autobiography, extensively examine the autobiographical Self as a fictional construct. Keeping this in mind, though, I will be using the term "autobiographical fact" to signify Bohannan's distinction between the representation of herself as "real" and the characters in Return to Laughter--although based in "reality"--as "fictitious."

5. See Ohnuki-Tierney for a brief discussion of the distinction between self-reflectivity and self-reflexivity: the former, he says, "simply involves 'isolated attentiveness toward oneself,'" whereas the latter refers to "the capacity of the self 'to become an object to itself'" (584).

My use of these terms is reversal of Ohnuki-Tierney's characterization. I use "self-reflexivity" to refer to, for example, a narrative which calls attention to itself as a narrative. "Self-reflective," on the other hand, I use to refer to someone engaged in a process of "self-discovery" or self-examination.

6. Whether James Clifford would admit to this I am not entirely sure. He refers to Return to Laughter in much the same way he treats Marjorie Shostak's ethnographic life writing, Nisa; Return to Laughter is inventive and in some ways ground-breaking, but it was not of trend-setting significance: "That Laura Bohannan had to disguise herself as Bowen, and her fieldwork narrative as a 'novel,' is symptomatic. But things were changing rapidly and others ... were soon writing 'factually' under their own names" (13, 14).

7. For a by no means comprehensive (even "representative") list of some of these articles and books, refer to: Daphne Patai, Judith Stacey, L.L. Langness and Gelya Frank, Marjorie Shostak (both Nisa and her article on Nisa in Interpreting Women's Lives), Michael Angrosino, Delmos Jones and the various contributors to the article "Indigenous Anthropology in Non-Western Countries: A Further Elaboration."

8. Talal Asad's contribution to "Indigenous Anthropology in Non-Western Countries: A Further Elaboration" mentions what I see as a criticism of this issue--i.e., of "objectively" viewing oneself while admitting an inability to view others "objectively":

> Many of the papers [at the seminar on indigenous anthropology] have stressed the importance of self-criticism in order to overcome "ethnocentric (or subjective) bias." No doubt what is meant by this is not so much criticism of oneself, but criticism of the anthropological work one is producing. Here again, we might consider the following question: Must we assume that only I am capable of criticising my own work with this desirable end in view? Or even: Am I necessarily better at criticising it than other people? (662, his emphasis)

9. It is only the "about the author" information which indicates that Bohannan worked among the Tiv of Northern Nigeria.

10. Mary Kingsley, Travels in West Africa 2-4.

11. See also Daphne Patai for a description of the "legitimating function [of] 'having a project' ... that transformed what might have been seen as offensive personal curiosity into something respectable" (144); and Bohannan on the community's expectation for her to fulfil her role as anthropologist--i.e., through note-taking (22, 30, 34).

12. Kako once tells her: "You are a European, and may do as you wish" (221). Bohannan also frequently makes reference to the fact that she is "a European and a woman" (213), "an anthropologist and an American, an heir to civilization" (238).

13. See also 149-151 for Udama's further explanations of the dynamics of the situation with Ticha who "really featured as a pawn in this hidden [family] conflict" (150).

14. Thiam does not specifically talk about the Tiv in her book, but Bohannan's references to polygamy confirm that it is indeed practised among the Tiv.

15. This is only one of many literary references in Bohannan's "fictional" autobiography. It seems fairly clear that Bohannan's textual representation of the Tiv is influenced by representations she is familiar with in literature and philosophy. See, for example, her references to Falstaff (178, 180), "familiar types ... the gossip, the flirt, the steady young man, [etc.]" (144-145), the contents of the station library and bookstore (101-102), Locke (146), Jane Austen (91), etc.

Chapter 3: Autobiographical Ethnographies, Ethnographic Autobiographies, or What?

> For someone who has previously published more than ten books, writing an autobiography should be a fairly easy task. One has simply to look back into oneself, lift the lid off the great past and allow its timelessness to overflow into the present through the channel of one's pen on paper. But writing my autobiography is not going to be easy. This is because most of my early novels, articles, poems and short stories are, like my children, too close to my heart. They are too real. They are too me.
>
> - Buchi Emecheta, Head Above Water 1

> I am not the heroine of a novel but an ordinary woman of this country, Senegal: a mother and a working woman--a mid-wife and child-welfare nurse--whose home and career leave her very little free time.... What would a woman write about who has no claim to any exceptional imagination or outstanding literary talent? She could only write about herself, of course.
>
> - Nafissatou Diallo, A Dakar Childhood ix

Ethnography and autobiographies of cultural Others

The most serious challenges to ethnographic representations, as we have seen, are the politics of (re)presenting cultural Others in Western scholarly discourse and the ability of ethnographers to realistically (re)present their informants. The perceived problems with representation are not easily resolvable, and so in the previous chapters I suggested reading strategies which accommodate explorations of both the politics and the efficacy of generating realistic representations.

Chapter One outlined two problems of mimetic representation: the first dealt with the politics of ethnographic fieldwork research and the second dealt with the nature of the mimetic representations in fieldwork reports. Together these problems, as I have called them,

destabilize the notion of an objective, scientific authority and the belief that mimetic representations can convey the totality of lived experiences. Chapter Two furthered my examination of both the process and the products of fieldwork research by exploring how one American anthropologist works through the intricacies of the research process. In both chapters I explored the politics and efficacy of realistic ethnographic representations of cultural Others along with the accompanying rhetorical project of positing an authorial Self. In the present chapter I will investigate the order of knowledge acquired from representations which are no longer faced with the sharp divide between author and life. In other words, I will explore the status of knowledge gained from cultural Others' self-representations.

In my previous chapters I gave evidence of anthropologists and other social scientists reading ethnographic documents for what the works reveal about the author(s) of the representations. Conversely, as I will show in this chapter, some literary critics and anthropologists examine autobiographies of cultural Others for their ethnographic information. James Olney, a literary critic and theorist of autobiography, proposes that African autobiographies provide readers with an eminently reliable way to "get inside" African culture(s). According to Olney, African autobiographies offer readers of African literature a picture of the cultural contexts of the literature. Michael Angrosino, an anthropologist and theorist of anthropological life writings, takes a more cautious approach to the study of the autobiographies of cultural Others than does Olney. Whereas Olney reads autobiographies with a view to a better

understanding of literature, Angrosino reads autobiographies specifically for their ethnographic "truths." Perhaps as a result of Angrosino's goals, he takes pains not to view autobiographies as transparent representations of the author's culture(s) nor even as transparent self-representations. Nonetheless, Angrosino does believe that there is something to be gained from reading autobiographies for ethnographic information.

In Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature James Olney argues that African autobiographies can be put "to the service" (20) of African literature, his basic premise being that the better a culture is understood, the better the literature can be understood. And Olney argues that the best method of learning about a culture (apart from directly experiencing it) is to read first-hand accounts--autobiographies--because, in Olney's words, autobiographies are "the most direct enactment and immediate manifestation of the ways, the motives, and the beliefs of a culture foreign to the reader" (6). Citing African writers to back his claims, Olney states that

> To look at one aspect of Gikuyu life, as [Jomo] Kenyatta emphasizes--and this seems to be true of other African cultures as well (excepting, probably, South Africa)--is to look at the whole: the whole is concentrated in every part and each part fully embodies the whole.... It is both natural and necessary, given what autobiography is, that this total, unified, integrated view will be the informing spirit in accounts written by Africans of their own lives. (10)

This particular view that part of a culture embodies the whole was also held by many early cultural anthropologists (Marcus and Fischer 55-57); so Olney is not alone.

In "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography," Olney's assertions about the nature of autobiography prove to be analogous to his claims about the nature of African cultures. For example, Olney explains that the bios (the life represented in an autobiography) can be understood not only as "the course of a lifetime" (239), but also as an "[extension] down to the roots of individual being ... a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious" (239). Both lives and African cultures seem to have "roots" or a "total, unified, integrated view"--a unifying principle. While I have some problems with the notion that there is something meaningful that can be called an essentialness of being or a particular state of being that exists independently of our abilities to articulate it, I find the assertion of an essential unity of African cultures even more troublesome, especially in light of his submission that it is not necessary to search for the origins of the "the essential unity ... of different African cultures" (Tell Me Africa 15):

> whatever its source and explanation, if we discover a unity of approach to experience, or a similarity of attitude toward what constitutes existence, in the autobiographical and personal-historical writings of geographically various Africans, there is little need to worry over the historical causes or to dispute the metaphysical sources of this unity. (15)

On the one hand, Olney seems to be making an ontological claim about the "naturalness" or essentialness of "African" experiences. But on the other hand, he suggests that the origin or source of unity is less important than its "symptom or manifestation in the literature" (15).

But what is the ontological status of this professed unity and

coherence? Are all experiences of being African reducible to some intrinsically African phenomenon, or are unity and coherence theoretical constructs open to negotiation and modification? Underlying this questioning of Olney's position is my unease with his complete effacement of women's autobiographies and women's experiences. Granted, Olney may not have had ready access to many women's autobiographies when he was working on Tell Me Africa, but it is partly for this reason that I question the basis of his belief in African unity and coherence.

Another reason I question Olney's basis for this belief lies in the fact that Olney, I think, sees himself making claims that aim beyond the studies contained in Tell Me Africa of African autobiographies and fictions: he argues that African autobiographies are useful in the anthropological sense of providing ethnographic insights into the lives of cultural Others. But what is the epistemological status of this acquired knowledge? We see Olney, in "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," professing that autobiographies offer "privileged access" to the lives of Others:

> autobiography ... offers a privileged access to an experience (the American experience, the black experience, the female experience, the African experience) that no other variety of writing can offer.... [A]utobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience and vision of a people, which is the same experience and the same vision lying behind and informing the literature of that people.... (13)

The desire to learn about cultural Others through biographical and autobiographical representations prompted me to engage in this study. However, I do not subscribe to the same view of transparency of

representations as Olney appears to, nor do I see the necessity of positing an essential African unity which constitutes the informing spirit of autobiographies in order to gain knowledge about an Other culture. As I argued in my Introduction, Olney's view of Africa's "unity, its indivisible coherence and singleness, its non-compartmentalized texture" (Tell Me Africa 10) is remarkably problematic because it moves beyond descriptive analysis of Africa and becomes prescriptive. If Olney intends the claim of unity to be seen as a discursive construct (not an essential feature of "Africanness") meant to thematize a specific set of texts, then I may be more sympathetic to Olney's position; however, he implies that rather than working as a discursive construct, a theoretical category, unity and coherence reside in the realm of lived experience.

African autobiographies, it seems, present an "immediacy" of African experience which is not offered by African fiction. For this reason Olney privileges the experiences conveyed by writers of autobiography: "Being himself the center and seismograph of the experience he records, the African autobiographer must give, so far as his vision extends, a unified and total view rather than the partial, exterior, objective view of, let us say, anthropology" (10). A first-hand account written by someone within the culture is more likely to provide accurate information about lived experiences of the entire culture than is an account by a foreigner. Thus, it stands to reason that if we take "autobiography" as simply a description of "how an individual or a group live, as recorded from within" (6), and if we agree with the postmodern anthropological view that ethnographies

necessarily contain elements revealing the process of authorial self-fashioning, then the conclusion that indigenous anthropologists can only write "autobiographies" is inevitable.

Olney's reference to Jomo Kenyatta (who "[writes] anthropology from within the African experience" [10, my emphasis]) only serves to reinforce the connection in his mind between indigenous anthropologists and autobiographers. Similarly, in "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," Olney asks us to "recall W.E.B. DuBois's Dark of Dawn, which is subtitled 'The Autobiography of a Race Concept': Is it sociology or autobiography, science or literature?" (5). As I explained in Chapter One, the assumed transparency and benefits of indigenous anthropology--which could be called "autobiography" in Olney's sense of the term--are, perhaps, as problematic (but for d.fferent reasons) as ethnographic research conducted by foreigners. To get the best of both worlds (so to speak), Choong Soon Kim has recently proposed that if "anthropologists from the non-Western world and the West can work together as equal partners [in ethnographic research], the benefits will be immense" (200). The insights of the foreign anthropologist would supplement or complement the work of the "insider" (and vice versa).

The limitations of using "autobiography" as "ethnography"

In Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography, L.L. Langness and Gelya Frank outline Georg Misch's argument that "autobiography has a philosophical pre-eminence over biography as a record of an individual's self-awareness" (91):

> First, autobiographers have all the facts at their disposal, while biographers always work through sources other than this kind of primary introspection. Second, autobiographers know the significance of the facts in relation to the whole at any time. (91)[1]

While these statements refer to the advantages afforded by autobiography over biography, they are very similar to reasons given by Olney for preferring to read "autobiographical writings" over specifically anthropological writings. There is a significant difference, however, between saying that one individual is representative of a whole culture and saying that one individual's self-representation is representative of her/his own self-awareness at any given moment. While I am cautious of Olney's generalizations, I am convinced--and I offer this in the form of a working assumption--that autobiographies do afford information about the author's culture if only through the author's self-representations of her/his experiences of that culture.

I come now to Michael Angrosino's suggestions about the advantages and disadvantages of reading an autobiography as an ethnographic account. In an article ("The Use of Autobiography as 'Life History'") exploring this question in relation to the autobiography, Through a Maze of Colour, by Albert Gomes, Michael Angrosino points out that "even the extraordinary individual is a product of his or her background" (134). Thus, an autobiography by even the most "extraordinary" or atypical member of a culture will convey, in some ways, ethnographic information. Although an autobiography is not necessarily representative of the individual experiences of all members of a culture, it is fairly safe to assume

that the autobiography recounts one individual's experience of her/his cultural context. Thus, I can make inferences about the culture represented in an autobiography, and these inferences will, in future readings, be corroborated or challenged.

The practice of using an autobiography as a life history, although oftentimes fruitful, is also problematic. And Angrosino warns us that, when reading autobiographies, we should be vigilant to recognize that the "process of abstraction [from a large mass of material collected through fieldwork] has been denied the anthropologist working with autobiography, because the selection process has been arrogated to the subject of his own accord" (134). Thus, in autobiographies, "the subject is focusing on incidents and is arranging a narrative in a conscious and usually highly selective fashion" (134). Authorial control rests with the autobiographer and not with the ethnographer; the cultural Other controls the representations of ethnographic information.

In a nutshell, James Olney sees individual autobiographies as representative of their cultures whereas Michael Angrosino is cautious about making definitive claims about how "representative" autobiographers--as seen through their self-representations--are of their own cultures. So where do these two views of the conjunction of autobiography and ethnography leave us in the project of discerning the epistemological status of the realistic self-representations of West African women? The two views present divergent positions regarding the ontology of both autobiographies and ethnographic accounts, and they function primarily to establish the theoretical

framework for my discussion of Buchi Emecheta's and Nafissatou Diallo's autobiographies, Head Above Water and A Dakar Childhood, respectively.

Self-representations in two West African women's autobiographies

Buchi Emecheta's and Nafissatou Diallo's autobiographies contain realistic self-representations, and both recount, in apparently self-evident prose, scenes from childhood and adult life. Yet neither author explicitly claims that she can describe unproblematically the complexities of her experiences; however, by placing themselves in positions of discursive control, authors of realistic representations imply that they--not readers or historical, political, literary critical practices--are responsible for producing the representations, and thus for directing the meanings of texts.

At the beginning of Head Above Water, Buchi Emecheta draws immediate attention to the fact that she will not present a full account of her life. She admits that within the space of one volume she could only begin to describe her forty years of existence but claims that her "fictional" works cover some of the territory which only glossed in her autobiography:

> writing my autobiography is not going to be easy.... Nonetheless, I am going to make the attempt, though not in the manner of many autobiographies, on a day-to-day basis. If I had to write of all my forty or so years in full, the way I experienced them and the way some of them had been related to me by well-meaning big and little mothers, it would run into several volumes. I will therefore write episodically, touching lightly here and there on those incidents on which I have dwelt in depth in my other books: Second-Class Citizen, In the Ditch, The Bride Price, The Slave Girl, The Joys of Motherhood and Double Yoke. (1)

Emecheta refers her readers to "fictional" works that take up the particular episodes not covered "in depth" in Head Above Water. This act of referral prompts us to question the nature of the representations in her "fictional" works: we are faced with the task of sorting out the modes of representation in Second Class Citizen and The Bride Price, for example, just as we ran into this same problem in Chapter Two with the fact-fiction tension in Laura Bohannan's autobiographical ethnography. But since Head Above Water is presented explicitly as an "autobiography," I need not embroil myself here in the debate over the nature of the "fictional" and "autobiographical" representations in her other books.

Emecheta's presentation of her life is, as she says, episodic, and enacted in "straightforward" prose. Her style is not highly allusive (except to her own works), nor is it primarily allegorical. In fact, she provides a very apt description of her own writing in Head Above Water; she expresses her interest in novels "based on 'social reality'" and says that she "found such documentary novels not only interesting but informative, too" (62). Thus, she set herself the task of writing such novel:

> I noticed a difference with this type of writing. I found it almost therapeutic. I put down all my woes. I must say that many a time I convinced myself that nobody was going to read them anyway, so I put down the whole truth, my own truths as I saw them. (62)

Although the therapeutic writing mentioned here refers specifically to her first autobiographical fiction, In the Ditch, Emecheta states that for her "Writing can be therapeutic and autobiographical writing even

more so, as it affords one a kaleidoscopic view of one's life" (3). Writing about oneself, according to Emecheta, opens the door for self-discovery as well:

> it was only when I started writing these autobiographical episodes that one question that had been nagging me for a very long time seemed to be answered. Why, oh why, do I always trust men, look up to them more than to people of my own sex, even though I was brought up by women? I suddenly realized that all this was due to the relationship I had with my mother. (3)

So, Emecheta believes that writing can be informative about "social reality"; it is also therapeutic and affords the opportunity for self-discovery.

Nafissatou Diallo's beliefs about writing are similar to Emecheta's. As the second epigraph of this chapter illustrates, Diallo claims that she does not have an "exceptional imagination or outstanding literary talent" (ix). However, one of Diallo's stated goals is the education of readers, specifically the youngsters of Senegal: "here are my memories of my childhood and adolescence. Senegal has changed in a generation. Perhaps it is worth reminding today's youngsters what we were like when we were their age" (ix). Writing is informative; it is also, as one critic of Diallo's autobiography says, an "effort at self-affirmation" (Lambrech 143). Diallo "seeks to be accepted for what she is and, more importantly, she wants to be free to be herself" (143).

A Dakar Childhood informs the reader of the lived experiences of a woman who grew up in a devout Muslim family in Senegal. The representations are realistic, the prose apparently unproblematical: "I was born in Tilène on 11 March 1941 in the area known as the

'Guards' Camp'. Don't try to find this Camp: it is now the Iba Mar Diop Stadium. Our house was one of the few civilian dwellings in that locality where the guards were stationed who watched over the Medina and its surroundings" (1). Descriptions of places, experiences and emotions are rendered in forthcoming prose as in the example above. The language is referential. However, the representations in A Dakar Childhood are, for a number of reasons, not unproblematical. Like, Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters, Diallo's text is translated from the French by Dorothy Blair. As well, Blair provides no introduction in which she explains her approach to translating. English readers are thus at a further remove from Diallo's original self-representations than readers of the original French edition would be.

Both Buchi Emecheta and Nafissatou Diallo engage in self-representation, and they do seem to "express themselves simply" (Thiam 15) within the realist tradition. Although taking such a position has indeed proved to be problematical, I agree with Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty when--in their discussion of an autobiographical essay by Minnie Bruce Pratt--they argue:

> Basic to the (at least implicit) disavowal of conventionally realist and autobiographical narrative by deconstructionist critics is the assumption that differences can emerge only through self-referential language, i.e., through certain relatively specific formal operations present in the text or performed upon it. Our reading of Pratt's narrative contends that a so-called conventional narrative such as Pratt's is not only useful but essential in addressing the politically and theoretically urgent questions surrounding identity politics. (194, my emphasis)

The act of realistically representing the Self is a political move, then. Emecheta makes this point explicitly in Head Above Water:

"because she ['Mother Africa'] did not write down her stories and her experiences, people of the West are bold enough to say that she has no history. I must not fall into the same trap. I must not allow myself to" (62). As a result of each author's decision to assert rather than call into question a politics of identity, neither Head Above Water nor A Dakar Childhood demonstrates even the slightest possibility "of the Author's disappearance" which has in "the structuralist and post-structuralist debates about subjectivity and the status of the text ... continue[d] to occupy and preoccupy the contemporary critical marketplace" (N. Miller 104). Emecheta and Diallo do not question whether or not their texts have the capacity to refer to their actual lives.

Recognition of their differences from me (as reader) and from each other (both West African women) may result from "deconstructing" the texts "through certain relatively specific formal operations present in the text or performed upon it" (194). But deconstruction is not the sole means by which differences can be articulated; in fact, deconstructionist readings may only "get at" the textual differences, the differences among signifieds. For reading autobiography "with 'suspicion' in a deconstructive sense" (608) is to call down the possibility of referentiality, as H. Porter Abbott argues. It "is not suspicion of an author and his or her intentions, but suspicion of language and the infinite deferral of the signified. Like the New Criticism, such an approach aspires to a purity of fictive response, erasing the author altogether" (608). In addition, as Mary Poovey argues:

> to accept the antihumanist premises of deconstruction is already to question the possibility that women, as opposed to "woman," exist. This is not to say that biological females do not exist but, rather, that neither sexuality nor social identity is given exclusively in and through the body, however it is sexed. (51)

However, reading "as if" Head Above Water and A Dakar Childhood have identifiable referents--which it seems to me they do--the given textual representations are of real lives and real bodies. We are thus able to posit how the authors might be similar to and different from us; recognition of differences, in this case, is based not to so much upon deconstructing textual signification as it is upon exploring the degree of textual referentiality or the connections between text and referent, reader and text.

As Nancy K. Miller contends:

> It seems to me ... that when the question of identity--the so-called crisis of the subject is posed, as it generally is, within a textual model, that question is irreducibly complicated by the historical, political, and figurative body of the woman writer. That is, of course, if we accept as a working hypothesis ... the location of female subjectivity in female authorship. (107)

As Miller contends, autobiographical representations problematize the notion of "pure textuality" and linguistic non-referentiality because the discourse must take into account the materiality of the body. "Bodies" do not cease to exist simply because we cannot speak about them; however, discursive representations of bodies would cease to exist. One of the problems with which women deal when attempting to talk about their own bodies is the problem of finding the "right" words to convey their lived experiences. But if we recall Awa Thiam's presentation of women talking about their own bodies while addressing

the practices of clitoridectomy, excision, and infibulation, the women, for the most part, seem to convey quite clearly the trauma suffered as a result of certain rituals (Thiam 61-68). The ability to (re)present discursively and realistically one's own body is assumed.

But do representations of the body necessarily have to appear in representations of women's lives? Clearly, it would seem they need not; take Emecheta's and Diallo's autobiographies, for example. Yet this is not to say that bodies, as well as sexuality, have no function in "determining" the interpersonal relations described in texts; it is to say that textual (re)presentations are only partial descriptions of lived experience. Head Above Water and A Dakar Childhood are not equivalent to Emecheta's and Diallo's lives, respectively; the self-representations in the books are overdetermined in a number of ways. So how does the decision to omit textual representations of their own bodies make a difference to the way we read their autobiographies?

Autobiography, women's bodies, and female sexuality

I began my study of West African women's life writings with a text dealing with realistic representations of women's bodies. The text, Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters, offered story after story of women recounting their thoughts on clitoridectomy, excision, infibulation, and polygamy. Although first names and countries were indicated for each voice, the women are not identifiable. The Western feminist discourses within which this text would most likely circulate would certainly assure the anonymity of the women, and I would expect that even within their countries of origin, the women whose voices

appear in Thiam's text would not be easily identifiable. The guarantee of anonymity was likely a condition under which the women agreed to speak. This is, of course, conjecture on my part. But I offer it as a way of broaching discussion of the self-representations of the two West African women. In Chapters One and Two, I used Thiam's open discussion of the prevalent practices of clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation as a way of "measuring" what is included in and excluded from representations of West African women. And since realistic representations efface the gaps among life, author, text, and reader, I have found Thiam's text an expedient example of one subject--there are many more--that is often effaced.

Although Speak Out, Black Sisters forcefully documents women talking about their own lives and bodies, Awa Thiam does not appear in the text in the same way as do her informants; she does not provide references to her own body or sexuality, as do her informants. (We should also remember that Thiam's book would fit Olney's description of "African autobiography" since Thiam is an African writing about Africans.) If, as Shirley Neuman suggests, "Bodies rarely figure in autobiography" (1), we might have some very good reasons to suppose why, in the life writings I have examined thus far, bodies are not more frequently (re)presented, especially the bodies of the authors. As Awa Thiam, Mary Daly (in Gyn/Ecology), Fran Hosken (in The Hosken Report) and Olayinka Koso-Thomas (in The Circumcision of Women) point out, the practices of female circumcision (which encompass the range of practices from clitoridectomy to infibulation) are intensely political issues: they are "resorted to evidently with the object of

literally reconstructing women's bodies to bring them in line with what the culture considers acceptable sexuality in women" (Ahmed 41, her emphasis). Yet these practices are not often addressed outside of feminist, anthropological and medical discourses. And as Pat Caplan observes, even when women's bodies and sexuality are addressed, there is a danger that the discussion will "[become] a compendium of bizarre exotica" (xi).

Given that discussions of women's bodies and female sexuality are such personal and political issues, and given that Thiam, Emecheta and Diallo are eminently more identifiable than the women whose voices appear in Thiam's text, it might not seem too surprising that the three aforementioned women would remain silent in their texts about their own bodies and sexuality, for these are very sensitive topics. And within the autobiographical tradition, Neuman contends, it is primarily in "anomalous moments when self-representations of a feminine body rupture and exceed the spiritual discourse of autobiography" (3).

It is highly likely that neither Emecheta nor Diallo see their autobiographies as proper forums for talking about the practices mentioned in Thiam's text or about their or anyone else's sexuality. However, we can be almost certain that Emecheta and Diallo would be aware of female circumcision, as I will now explain. Emecheta, in a recent article for the New Internationalist, does acknowledge the practice of clitoridectomy in Nigeria:

> I remember one unfortunate girl who was born outside the country and whose parents did not circumcise her. How we made fun of her 'sticking out' part. Some more daring girls would volunteer

> to scrub her back for her and 'accidentally' touch her 'almost male part.' All this was done in jest. (11)

This passage corroborates Thiam's observation that one justification given for clitoridectomy is that it removes the "male parts" of a girl so the girl can become a "proper" woman, i.e., more feminine (Thiam 69-70). However, the passage also reveals, it seems to me, a fundamental difference of opinion with Thiam about the justice of clitoridectomy: Emecheta calls the girl "unfortunate" apparently not because she was being teased but because she was not circumcised. Emecheta certainly does not question or condemn female circumcision in her article, and I am led to believe that she and Thiam would disagree about the practice.

Emecheta's discussion of her perceptions of sexuality in Nigeria prompts me to think that it is not because Emecheta does not take the representations of women's bodies and female sexuality as taboo subjects for a public forum--quite the opposite, in fact. Emecheta openly admits the misconceptions of female sexuality which result from the perceived necessity to remove "male parts" of the female body. These misconceptions, Emecheta explains, led her to be confused about "Western" lesbianism and non-circumcised females:

> I would ask my Western feminist colleagues: 'What do lesbians do with each other?' I could not imagine how women could have sex together. Sometimes I imagined that maybe women from the West grew penises since they were not circumcised. I noticed friends laughed when I said this. They probably thought I knew it was not so. But I did not. (11)

Even in "enlightened" feminist circles, a feeling of unease accompanies discussions of sexuality and women's bodies, as Emecheta

poignantly illustrates.

Like Emecheta, Diallo also avoids making reference to her own sexualized body and to the topic of female circumcision. Again, like Emecheta, she is probably not unaware of female circumcision, since she is likely to encounter women and children in her work as a midwife and child welfare nurse who have undergone the operation (ix). Like Laura Bohannan (see Chapter Two), however, Diallo does recount the ritual of male circumcision and draws attention to the unnecessary pain the boys must go through:

> Later on I knew of cases of circumcision being performed on young men of twenty who had been made to wait till that age so that they could appreciate the importance of the occasion to which they were submitting voluntarily. This was in rural areas and it probably still goes on in the same way today, under the same conditions no doubt that often prove fatal, without anaesthetic, with no antiseptics or anti-tetanus treatment, and naturally without antibiotics. (13)

Given Diallo's concern for the painful and unhygienic practices of male circumcision, it seems rather odd that she does not address the practice as it relates to women, but on this point, Diallo's autobiography remains silent.

Whereas Thiam argues with great urgency against practices which she sees as ultimately oppressive, Emecheta and Diallo apparently decide that autobiographies are not the place for such discussion. I want to return, here, to the question I posed at the end of the last section: how does the decision to omit textual representations of their own bodies and of sexuality make a difference to the way we read Emecheta's and Diallo's autobiographies? Now, I would have to say that the most significant effect of such absences is the support it

offers the claim that representations cannot and do not "equal" lives in a mimetic sense: representations are not to be seen "as a direct representation of ... life, as something almost equivalent to ... life" (Frank 72). It is too easy (not to mention quite pointless) to "condemn" types of representation employed by the authors of life writings simply because direct reference is not made to the loci of the experiences (the body) which authors purport to represent. Vilifying a book because it says one thing when I may want it to say something else is of little use; I, as reader-tyrant, would simply be asking for a different book. Rather, I point to the gaps in representation in order to argue that the production of representations in any life writing is embroiled in discursive practices which reach far beyond the "tradition" of autobiographical writings. Representations in any form of life writing--be they anthropological, sociological, medical, or literary--are informed (but not necessarily limited) by constraints both disciplinary and personal.

Reading strategies

Buchi Emecheta's and Nafissatou Diallo's autobiographies provoke another set of questions concerning the politics of representation than do the life writings studied in Chapters One and Two. Instead of speculating about who can speak for or write about whom, the autobiographies encountered in this chapter elicit questions concerning how readers should read the self-representations of cultural Others. James Olney, as I have explained, reads "African

autobiographies" for ethnographic information, and he does this in the service of better understanding African literature. There is much to be said in favour of this approach to literature; however, Olney's further claim that all African autobiographies manifest either consciously or unconsciously some sort of unifying principle (whose origins we need not worry about) presents many problems for readers of "African autobiographies." Michael Angrosino's approach to autobiographies of cultural Others is more cautious with regard to the claims of knowledge derived from personal narratives, and it is his approach which I find the most compelling.

Whereas Chapters One and Two investigated the politics of Selves writing about cultural Others and of Selves writing about themselves in the process of representing those Others, this chapter deals specifically with the politics of a Self representing herself and being read as a cultural Other. Buchi Emecheta and Nafissatou Diallo, two West African women from very different cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds, engage in the process of recording their own personal and family stories for readers who are interested in, as Thiam says, "listening what she [the African woman] has to say ... when given an opportunity to speak for herself" (14).

If we were to take up Olney's approach to "African autobiographies," I am not entirely sure that Emecheta's Head Above Water would even qualify for discussion. Certainly it is by a woman born and raised in Africa. But Emecheta left Africa to live and work in England, and Head Above Water focuses primarily on Emecheta's twenty or so years in England. Thus, could we consider this an

"African autobiography" in Olney's sense of the term? I would have to say that the jury is out on this question. On the other hand, Nafissatou Diallo's A Dakar Childhood, I am sure, can be (at least partly) accommodated by Olney's characterization of "African autobiography," since it (re)presents Diallo's childhood and adolescence in Senegal as a member of a devout Muslim family. I would, however, be hard-pressed to pinpoint exactly what Olney might see as the unifying principle of African cultures which manifests itself in this book.

Olney does give some directions to readers of African autobiographies about what he considers to be "characteristically African" (Tell Me Africa 52):

> Despite the superficial diversity to be discovered in the motives, in the specialized points of view, and in the forms of African autobiographies, the writers, nevertheless, as human beings and as conscious speculators on their own lives, share (and this is no doubt especially true as the matter is viewed by a non-African reader) attitudes about the nature of human existence, assumptions about individual personality and its relation to communal life, and premises about perception and expression that are characteristically African and that therefore shape the autobiographies into a distinctly African configuration. (52, my emphasis)

However, we encounter a major problem with this view of a unity or coherence of "characteristically African" attitudes and assumptions when we compare Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters (which would partially qualify as autobiography in Olney's terms) to the Emecheta's and Diallo's autobiographies: Thiam's text drives home the idea that clitoridectomy, excision, infibulation, polygamy and skin whitening are destructive and oppressive practices. The authorial self-

representations in Head Above Water and A Dakar Childhood contain the large gaps in the form of silences about female sexuality and women's bodies. Emecheta's and Diallo's silences leave me wondering whether they have the same attitude as Thiam toward oppressive and destructive practices because, as I have already argued, Thiam and Emecheta (at least) do not seem to hold the same opinions.

Certainly these two opposing views of what Thiam sees as oppressive practices are not "superficial" differences, but constitute fundamental differences in perceptions about precisely those attitudes and assumptions which Olney lists above. It would seem, then, that Olney's conception of unity and coherence cannot accommodate contradictory experiences of being "African." I suggest this is in part due to Olney's belief that a particular sort of unity and coherence can be described as ontologically African, whereas the field of "African autobiography"--like the category "West African women"--is discursively constructed and not an essentialist statement of "fact."

My qualms about Olney's perception of the unity and coherence have been well articulated by Christopher Miller in his article, "Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology":

> I cannot make myself into an African.... On the other hand, the fact of being biologically or culturally African neither guarantees nor necessarily permits any sort of purely authentic 'African' reading, in a relation of total oneness with its text or with Africa itself. (121)

Miller's comment, which specifically addresses the practice of reading as an "African," holds true, I think, for any discussion which might posit a "purely authentic 'African' [or European, or North American

...] reading."

But Olney is careful to draw his notion of the "oneness" of Africa from African authors, especially from the work of Jomo Kenyatta, instead of seeming to construct this essentializing view himself. It is, therefore, interesting to note that Awa Thiam also draws on Kenyatta's writings; she does this, however, to illustrate his belief that the social cohesion of Black communities is maintained through the preservation of traditional practices oppressive to women, for example, the practices of clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation (Thiam 82-85). Thiam mentions Kenyatta in order to question whether cultures that "force" women to submit to certain notions of femininity are worth keeping in their "traditional" state. Thiam is not by any means advocating a wholesale endorsement of "Western" values; she simply argues, as Nicole-Claude Mathieu points out in "'Woman' in Ethnology," that some traditions should be modified to rid societies of destructive and oppressive practices (5-6).

As I suggested in the last section, Emecheta and Diallo do not call into question (and perhaps even support) the practices discussed in Thiam's book. It might be argued that Thiam imposes "Western feminist" attitudes on African women and that her attitudes should not be considered "truly" African. But coming back to Christopher Miller's remarks, what, if anything, is truly African? Surely there are common experiences, common perceptions, common beliefs, but these should not be regarded as universally African. The commonalities of African autobiographies may exist as much in the tradition of African autobiographical representation as they do in the lived experiences of

Africans. So, if I were to follow Olney's suggestion for reading African autobiographies as transparent representations of "the African experience," I would run into the potentially irresolvable difficulty of trying to determine what is "truly" African.

Instead of reading an "African autobiography" as representative of African culture as a whole manifest in its many parts, I think our best move would be to follow Michael Angrosino's suggestion that we read an autobiography by a cultural Other as first and foremost representative of the author's life and only secondarily and tentatively as a reflection of the author's culture. Granted, Olney and Angrosino have very different motivations for reading autobiographies of cultural Others: Olney reads autobiographies for ethnographic information useful for an understanding of the cultural, political and social contexts of African literature, whereas Angrosino reads autobiographies specifically for the acquisition of cross-cultural knowledge. (Gaining knowledge in this latter case, is an end in itself.) Perhaps as a result, Angrosino's approach is more cautious regarding what are taken to be "truths" about cultures; Angrosino pays more attention to the politics of representation both in autobiographies (see "The Use of Autobiography") and ethnographic accounts (see "The Two Lives") than does Olney. However much I sympathize with Olney's claim that autobiographies provide "the most direct enactment and immediate manifestation of the ways, the motives, and the beliefs of a culture foreign to the reader" (6), I remain convinced that inquiries into the politics of representation will help me determine the order of knowledge that I can acquire from reading

the autobiographies of cultural Others.

The extent to which Emecheta's and Diallo's autobiographies are seen as "representative" of their specific cultures (Ibo and Senegalese Muslim, respectively) will depend in part on reading practices. And given all the crises in autobiographical representation regarding the nature and ability of language to (re)present lived experiences and the politics of reading realistic self-representations of cultural Others for ethnographic information, I have adopted the practice of hunting for gaps. Since representations offer only partial pictures of subjects, exploring what is and is not included and examining, for example, the representations' historical, cultural and political contexts will contribute to our understanding of the representations' claims on and to "reality." And, I would further suggest, representations' claims to reality are based largely on the rhetorical dimensions of the narratives, the (re)presented positioning of the author is her/his discourse.[2]

As I argued in Chapters One and Two, one claim that realistic representations make is the claim of the authority of the writer. And as we have seen, the point of view of a personal narrative is not only important stylistically, but also rhetorically (see Rabinow 244; Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority"; Schipper 54). Of ethnography, James Clifford argues:

> The textual embodiment of authority is a recurring problem.... An older, realist mode ... can now be identified as only one possible paradigm for authority. Political and epistemological assumptions are built into this and other styles, assumptions the ethnographic writer can no longer afford to ignore. (53)

Claims to authority in discourse, although problematized, will not disappear. We need not give up faith in authors and texts in their attempts to impart knowledge, but we should be aware of the decisions we make when we read, decisions, for example, about "how we should expect to 'take' [a] style or mode of construction--what force it should have for us" (Bruss 4).

Realistic representations--indeed, any representations--can be read in many different ways, and the reading strategies which I have been elaborating emphasize gaps in texts in order to facilitate explorations of the politics of representation. Real lives, like representations of those lives, are "overdetermined by language and ideology, history and geography" (Lionnet 28), as are our interpretations of texts. Reading strategies offer methods by which we can interpret texts, but because interpretations are in most cases (re)presentations of texts, they, too, offer only partial descriptions of how a text works or what a text means. Françoise Lionnet eloquently argues for a reading practice similar to the one I have been endorsing and elaborating in my thesis. Of her own practices Lionnet explains:

> I try to derive my interpretive strategies from the texts themselves rather than to adopt a single theoretical lens from the vast array of critical approaches available to the contemporary critic. This approach enables me to analyze the ways in which rhetorical structures produce meaning and to elucidate the process whereby text and context can ultimately be derived from the linguistic structures interacting on different levels of textual production. I then draw conclusions or elaborate theories on the basis of this close textual scrutiny. (27-28)

When it comes to reading strategies, I hope to have shown by now the

benefits of examining the structures of the relationships among the various terms involved in every representation. I hope also to have shown that reading, like writing, entails decision-making. Consciously or unconsciously, we make decisions about how we choose to read texts, and these decisions are ultimately political ones.

Returning to the question of how should we read the realistic self-representations of cultural Others, I will suggest that Emecheta's and Diallo's autobiographies are not transparent depictions of "the African experience," but they do both offer readers insights into Emecheta's and Diallo's feelings and thoughts about their cultural, historical and social contexts. Thus, while agreeing with Olney that autobiographies can offer insights into the lives of cultural Others, I hesitate to draw from autobiographies hard and fast distinctions about what constitutes a cross-cultural "truth" and what does not.

In my reading of Buchi Emecheta's and Nafissatou Diallo's autobiographies, I see the authors employing realistic representation in order to address, in Biddy Martin's and Chandra Mohanty's words, "the politically and theoretically urgent questions surrounding identity politics" (194). Emecheta, as I have already mentioned, says that she wants to speak up for herself so she is not like "Mother Africa," who had her history "written" for her because she had not written it for herself (62). Diallo also wants to write her own life, and more specifically she wants to write about ordinary people like her father whose importance is often forgotten or overlooked by history: "I would tell this to his children, to his grandchildren; why

should I not tell it to the world? Why should I not say to the world which lives with its eyes fixed on great men and women, that it is the unimportant, modest folk who support and carry the weight of the great?" (133). Both Emecheta and Diallo, through their autobiographies, ensure that their histories and the stories of their families will be told. Emecheta's and Diallo's self-representations are overdetermined constructs, as we have seen; however, one reading I offer of both Head Above Water and A Dakar Childhood--and I consciously take my clues "straight" from the text--stresses the urgency of "identity politics." Emecheta and Diallo find it important to represent themselves and their families--in other words, to assert their own identities and tell their own stories. Their autobiographies are not "who am I?" or soul-searching narratives; their autobiographies are proud declarations of their own identities.

Notes

1. The first of Misch's assumptions, it should be noted, is highly problematic in light of recent theory of autobiography. See, for example, Paul John Eakin's and Sidonie Smith's discussions of inventing the Self through the act of writing. See also Smith's examination of the importance of memory in (re)constructing/inventing the Self.

2. For a discussion of the significance of the act of writing in relation to positing an authorial (authoritative) Self see Paul Rabinow ("Representations are Social Facts"), James Clifford ("On Ethnographic Authority"), Mineke Schipper ("'Who am I?': Fact and Fiction in African First-Person Narrative"), Paul John Eakin (Fictions of Autobiography) and Shari Benstock ("Authorizing the Autobiographical"). Eakin and Benstock argue against Olney's presentation of autobiography as "a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious" in favour of viewing the Self as a construct arising from the act of writing.

Conclusion: Reading for Action

> Texts work and move because they are read. But audiences must learn how to read texts, especially those that are "different" because they stretch and extend rhetorical convention.... This problem pulls writing toward the conventional, as authors strive to communicate effectively with audiences that exist. But a more transformative solution would involve more explicit attention to methods for reading innovative texts. Part of the task of feminist writing, then, should be to instruct a newly forming audience about how to read and hear our words.
>
> - Marjorie DeVault, "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis" 111-112

The nature and politics of representation

This thesis situates itself within two distinct but related debates. The first deals with the nature of language and with the ability of language to (re)present lived experiences, and the second deals not so much with actual textual representations as it does with the process of arriving at these representations. On one side of the first debate, critics argue that language is "embodied" and can fully describe an experience. On the other side, critics assert that because of the nature of language, representations will never portray the totality or immediacy of an experience. My own critical convictions fall somewhere between these two positions. Language is a social construct, and thus the meanings of words are conventionally arrived at. One implication of such a view of language is that in order to comprehend the meanings of words one must understand on some level the conventions governing meaning. As post-structuralist critics claim, referentiality--the connections between words and the objects, events, concepts to which words refer--is not "natural" and

completely determinate. However, referentiality is, I would argue, a conventionally understood practice whereby we try to make sense of the world around us. Whereas some critics argue that "words somehow embody a culture from which they derive" and that some words "may be held to be predicated on certain untransferable cultural experiences" (Ashcroft et al. 52-53), such a view of language begs questions about the "essential cultural essence[s]" (53) embodied by the words. For this reason, even though the "idea that language somehow 'embodies' culture ... is a seductive one" (53), it is an idea of which we should be cautious.

The second part of this first debate concerns the ability of representations to describe lived experiences. Realistic representations, by nature, seem to occlude questions regarding their completeness; in other words, attention is drawn away from the gaps in representation and is focused on what the representations contain. In Chapter One, we saw that Awa Thiam implicitly makes a political move in choosing to present Black African women's stories through mimetic representations. The life histories by Beverly Mack, Enid Schildkrout and Ivor Wilks, to varying degrees, also ground their texts in the realist tradition. They do not explicitly claim that they "attempt to apprehend the true existence of the Black women" (Thiam 14, my emphasis) as Thiam does; however, the nature of realistic representation is such that, as Gelya Frank says, it encourages readers to treat representations as "something almost equivalent to the informant's life" (72).

In Chapter Two, we saw that Laura Bohannan's autobiographical

ethnography has a rather problematical relationship with traditional forms of realistic representation. Return to Laughter is nonetheless firmly grounded in the realist tradition, since radically problematizing the relationships between textual representations and their referents would undermine Bohannan's efforts to grapple with (in her autobiography) the difficulties of anthropological fieldwork. And in Chapter Three we witnessed a return to relatively "problem-free" conceptions of realistic representation. Neither Buchi Emecheta nor Nafissatou Diallo problematize the relationship between textual representations and referents (Emecheta's and Diallo's lives). In each of the three chapters, I questioned the transparency of realistic representations, but I also cautioned against moving away from the possibility of referentiality.

The second debate in which my thesis finds itself situated concerns the politics of representation and covers the territory from the process of arriving at textual representations to the process of reading and interpreting those representations. The questions, who can "speak for" or represent whom, and who has the "right" to say what about whom, are central to my discussions of the politics of representation. In Chapter One I examined one ethnographic text by an African woman about West African women and three life histories of West African women written by foreign researchers. Awa Thiam's text contains apparently "self-evident" meanings. The women speak for themselves and the meanings of their words are "obvious" from what they say. The three life histories, by foreigners, are also grounded in the realist tradition and de facto make certain claims about

representing the realities of their informants' lives. Mack, Schildkrout and Wilks present the narratives in such a way that the author(ity) of the narrative is not to be questioned, even if (in Wilks's case) the information presented is sketchy and partially based on hearsay.

Chapter Two took up the question, what does it mean for an anthropologist to (re)present cultural "Others"? How is/should this be done? Laura Bohannan published in 1954 what I have argued can be seen as a paradigmatic postmodern anthropological text: it is autobiographical "fact" and ethnographic "fiction." If an anthropologist does not have the "right" to write autobiographically and also biographically about cultural Others, what is it exactly that the anthropologist writes in an ethnography? Removing the "I" of the anthropologist from the narrative does not make an ethnography "objective."

If there are problems with biographical representations or "ethnographic fictions" of cultural Others, then surely self-representations of cultural Others should be more reliable. Not necessarily so, as I explained in Chapter One and touched on again in Chapter Three: the politics of the ethnographic representations examined in the third chapter no longer concern who can (or has the "right") to speak for whom, since the subject herself does the (re)presenting. The questions become: how are we supposed to read the self-representations of cultural Others? Are the representations accurate and reliable--are they "truly" autobiographical and thus (according to some) ethnographic fact? If, as many postmodern

anthropologists suggest, I cannot describe a culture because there is not a static culture to represent, then is it not an analogous assumption that an autobiographer (or biographer, even) must "invent" a Self because there is not a static Self to represent? This question is given special consideration in recent autobiographical criticism and theory, especially in Paul John Eakin's investigation, Fictions of Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention (1985) and in Sidonie Smith's A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation (1987).

As I have tried to show in this thesis, the crisis in representation has affected both the writing and reading of ethnography and autobiography to the extent that there are striking parallels between recent ethnographic and autobiographical criticism. This should not be too surprising since both autobiography and some forms of ethnography involve representing lives. Recent criticism of life writings, influenced especially by post-structuralism, has called into question the stability of each term involved in representation: the life purportedly being represented, the author, the text and the reader. The questions asked of autobiographies are different from those asked of ethnographies--as I have outlined above--but the questions all stem from the basic uncertainty about the ability of representation to "do its job" successfully and responsibly.

There is a point at which ethnographic criticism and autobiographical criticism directly cross each other's paths. Gelya Frank observes of life histories: "Speaking somewhat metaphorically, the life history is a double autobiography, since it is to the

investigator's personal experiences that the subject's accounts are first referred." And James Clifford's comments echo Frank's: "It has become clear that every version of an 'other,' wherever found is also the construction of a 'self,' and the making of ethnographic texts ... has always involved a process of 'self-fashioning'" (23-24). So, ethnographic life writings involve the interaction of two stories: the story of the subject and the story of the author. According to Stephen Spender, autobiographical writing also involves two stories:

> An autobiographer is really writing a story of two lives: his life as it appears to himself, ...when he looks out at the world from behind his eye-sockets; and his life as it appears from outside in the minds of others; a view which tends to become in part his own view of himself also, since he is influenced by the opinions of these others. (Spender quoted in Neuman 3)

What seems clear from the intersection of ethnographical and autobiographical theorizing is the profound connectedness of Self and Other. Selves do not exist in isolation any more than Others do. In fact, the categories of Self and Other depend for their existence upon their relations to one another. Therefore, in life writings, representations of Self and representations of Others will be bound together and will be mutually dependent. And, since the life stories that I have examined are all "literary" (as opposed to oral or pictorial), they share certain conventions of representation. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese puts it:

> A literary tradition, even an autobiographical tradition, constitutes something more than a running, unmediated account of the experience of a particular group. The coherence of such a tradition consists as much in unfolding strategies of representation as in experience itself. (Fox-Genovese 65)

Textual representations are determined in part both by individual lived experiences and by traditional strategies of representation which authors of life writings either adopt, modify, or reject.

Yet, the perceived "crisis in representation" presents, as I have shown, profound problems especially for authors and readers of ethnographic and autobiographical life writings, because beliefs in the stability of selfhood and in the stability of conventions--for example, of representation, meaning, and referentiality--are called into question. Such scepticism has, in Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin's words, "effected ... a wholesale retreat from geography and history into a domain of pure 'textuality' in which the principle of indeterminacy smothers the possibility of social or political 'significance' for literature" (x). And, as a result, I have tried to assert the connection (however tenuous it may be) between the referent and the representation because it has become, I believe, a political necessity and also a theoretical responsibility.

The strength of the connection between the referent and the representation will depend to a large extent upon the reader's perceptions of the political exigencies of her particular reading strategies. If representation is to be successful, there must be open lines of communication between author and reader via the text. Communication fails if the reader does not accept the terms of the representation or if factors such as race, gender, class, age, etc. (and any combination thereof) prevent the reader from understanding a representation.[1]

Perhaps the first "demand" made by the texts examined in this

study is that readers recognize that the life writings refer to real West African women. The authors of the life writings do not question whether the subjects of the narratives really exist. I have chosen to follow the authors' leads and make the same assumption. On the most basic level, communication does occur between an author and myself, when I accept that the writing refers (and has the ability to refer) to real people. I make my decision to accept the terms of representation based upon my faith in the sincerity of each author and my belief that taking life writings seriously is a responsibility of the reader.

Reading as strategy

My thesis performs what I consider to be a "totalizing gesture," a type of gesture which I have criticized in my Introduction. Life writings by and about West African do not in any way constitute a "naturally" given category; thus the creation of such a category of life writings is necessarily artificial and provisional. The women whose lives are implicated in this thesis may have nothing more in common than that they come from a region often referred to as West Africa. And I have chosen to focus on life writings of/by women specifically from West Africa partly because I found the texts, themselves, very interesting and partly because they worked well together.

My original intention in engaging in this study stemmed not only from my unease with literary critical theories which deny the possibility of referentiality but also from my desire to explore

alternative prospects for maintaining a belief in referentiality. It is clear that theories decrying the possibility of referentiality, have a potentially devastating impact on any written text, especially on representations in life writings and post-colonial literatures. I have argued that writers make decisions--consciously or not--about the form of their (re)presentations. Similarly, readers make choices about how they read texts, and it is through reading practices that I think some bridges can be constructed to span the chasms exposed (and, in some cases, created) by literary critical theories.

As my research on life writings progressed, very interesting intersections between ethnographic and autobiographical modes of representation became clear, and my theoretical examination of these modes has travelled in a full circle: there is a desire within postmodern anthropology to write and read ethnographies as "autobiographies" (of the authors), and there is a desire within autobiographical criticism to read autobiographies of cultural Others as "ethnographies." What these reading strategies offer is a way of exploring what <u>else</u> a representation has to offer apart from the apparently explicit intent of the narrative. That is to say, when reading an ethnographic narrative, I might ask, who is generating the representation, and why am I justified in believing what the representation tells me? These are obviously complex questions.

Reading ethnographies as "autobiographies" and autobiographies as "ethnographies" can offer interesting insights into the life writings. For example, ethnographies provide information--either explicitly or implicitly--about the fieldwork, the relationship

between the researcher, informant and text. This information helps me form opinions about the order of knowledge I acquire as a result of reading the text and about what justification I can give in support of the claim that I can actually learn something about the informant's life from the ethnography. Similarly, when reading an autobiography by someone from a different cultural background and race than myself, I am likely to learn something about that other culture. I must be careful, however, as I outlined in Chapter Three, not to make hasty generalizations based on representations that may not be "representative" at all. Buchi Emecheta does not present herself as "representative" of all the Ibo women in London, and, although Nafissatou Diallo sets herself up as an "ordinary woman" of Senegal, she clearly differentiates herself from her young schoolmates and the female members of her family and could be differentiated from "ordinary women" by virtue of her position as a "high-caste" Muslim (Blair 120).

I would conclude from the full circle in which I have travelled theoretically, that while useful in many ways for clarifying or highlighting certain features of the life writings, the practice of reading ethnographies as autobiographies and autobiographies as ethnographies offers only limited and somewhat problematic views of these narratives.

I have, in my examination of West African women's life writings, been primarily concerned with reading strategies. There are many different ways to read texts and to theorize about them. The act of

reading is partly controlled by the reader, but it is also partly beyond the reader's control. It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all that might happen during individual acts of reading, but I would like to present an anecdote here to explain how acts of reading are not completely "controlled" by the reader. As I was reading Buchi Emecheta's autobiography, a passage about laughing (15) was highlighted for me when outside in the street I could hear laughter. I might have passed over the references to laughter had it not been emphasized by the coincidence just described.[2] This particular act of reading, therefore, was not completely under my control--I did not will the laughter in the street to occur. Words on a page can "come alive" and acquire new meanings as a result of such unexpected connections made during the act of reading. Meanings derived from these sorts of connections are not to be found buried in the text; they arise as a direct result of the act of reading.

Because reading is not a completely controllable act, I do not think it would be possible to come up with a comprehensive "theory" of reading. I have tried, however, to find ways of reading life writings that will neither buy into beliefs about the transparency of language and the ability of language to communicate an immediacy or totality of lived experience nor buy into post-structuralist theories which suspend the referent. So how can theory be useful in coming to grips with my present dilemma? It was, after all, theorists who called into question whether texts can refer to beings in the world.[3]

I tend to think of theory as useful insofar as it can be put into the service of understanding, as Barbara Christian says, "the

intricacies of the intersections of language, class, race, and gender" (69). In other words, theory should be thought of as a strategy (Katrak 157). Rather than embarking on a journey to find a theory for reading all of the life writings which I examine, I have attempted to read each text using these basic strategies of inquiry: what is the order of representation? what is the mode of representation? what do the representations say? what do the representations efface?

Texts can be read in many different ways, and each reading affords a different perspective. Hence my interest in the strategies offered by anthropological and autobiographical criticism for reading life writings: ethnographies read as autobiographies, autobiographies read as ethnographies. The different readings which I "impose" upon texts will render different meanings; thus, the knowledge acquired from my act of reading will vary according to my reading strategy.

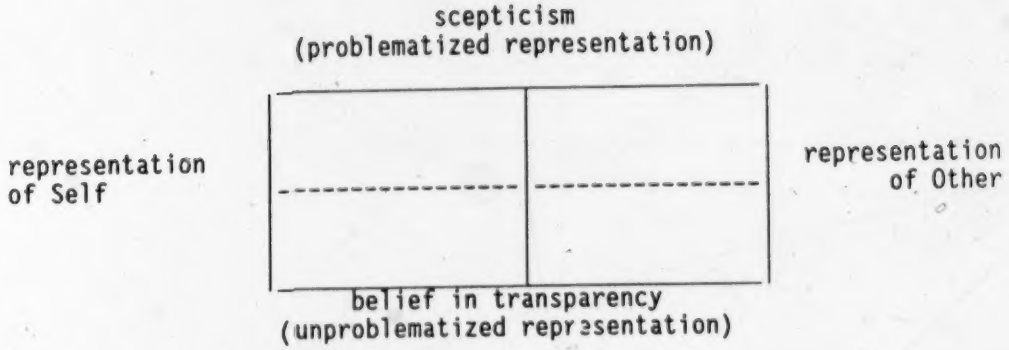
I feel that I must qualify these comments, though, because I do not want to give the impression that all readings are of equal value. Reading is not a free-for-all. The politically sticky issue then arises: where do I draw the line between "good" and "bad" readings? Who am I to make this distinction?

Reading and responsibility

Ketu Katrak, in her essay "Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women's Texts," argues that "Social responsibility must be the basis of any theorizing on postcolonial literature as well as the root of the creative work of the writers themselves. Whereas writers commonly respond seriously to the many urgent issues of their

societies, critics/theorists of this literature often do not" (157). As a result, Katrak observes many "disconcerting trends in the recent production and consumption of postcolonial theory" (158). Among these "subtly insidious trend[s]" (158) is one which I mentioned in my Introduction, that is "to succumb to the lure of engaging in hegemonic discourse of Western theory given that it is 'difficult' or 'challenging,' often with the sole purpose of demonstrating its shortcomings for an interpretation of postcolonial texts" (158). My whole thesis has involved illustrating the insights offered by and the "shortcomings" of some "Western" theories--postmodern anthropology, post-structuralist literary criticism, autobiographical criticism, etc. My motivation, however, is not only to engage in theory because it is "difficult" or "challenging" or because I want to demonstrate how inadequate it is--I will come back to this point in my last section, "Reading for Action."

In the epigraph to this chapter, Marjorie DeVault stresses that "Texts work and move because they are read" (DeVault 111), but she also claims that "audiences must learn how to read texts" (111, my emphasis). This assertion is one I have elaborated in my examinations of West African women's life writings. Each text requires a different reading strategy because each text makes different claims and different demands upon the reader. Consider for the moment the following diagram:



If I were to graph the representations of Others presented in Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters, they would be found in the lower right-hand corner of the above diagram. Also in the same general area we would find the life histories by Beverly Mack, Enid Schildkrout and Ivor Wilks, except that the life histories by the latter two ethnographers would be placed slightly upwards and farther to the left since the narratives of Schildkrout and Wilks are, to a limited degree, self-reflexive.

Laura Bohannan's autobiographical ethnography straddles two points on the diagram. Her self-representations are relatively unproblematically presented (as I outlined in Chapter Two), which would place the point in about the centre of the lower left-hand quadrant. However, I would place her "fictional" (re)presentations of the Tiv in the centre of the upper right-hand quadrant. The two realistic autobiographies by West African women--Buchi Emecheta's Head Above Water and Nafissatou Diallo's A Dakar Childhood--occupy the lower left-hand corner of the diagram.

I have tried with each text to understand the representations by reading them into the centre of the diagram where the axes cross.

This intersection between the Self/Other representations and the scepticism of/belief in transparency is the most politically enabling location on the diagram. We have already seen how, in postmodern anthropological theory, realistic representations of Others are questioned to the point that ethnographic representations are written and read in favour of (what I see as) a privileging of the anthropologist's (realistic) representation of the Self, a self-representation borne out of the desire to identify the dynamics of the fieldwork situation. Ethnographic accounts of this sort would occupy the same space as the realist autobiographies by Emecheta and Diallo in that the accounts tend toward transparent representations of Self even though they are usually read for the information they provide about cultural Others. And Emecheta's and Diallo's texts--if read as James Olney seems to suggest--would occupy the same space as Thiam's text, in that they would be read as transparent representations of cultural Others.

In my previous chapters I have demonstrated that no position in the diagram is problem-free, but my solution has not been to throw my hands up in despair. I have instead argued for reading strategies that will bring all readings together--where the axes cross. This approach to theorizing allows me to convey that: 1) language can go a long way to (re)present lived experience, even though some events and experiences may forever lie beyond the reach of linguistic representation, and 2) readers should ask who creates the representations and what is the order of the representations. I have chosen the different reading strategies iterated above in the face of

the scepticism of realistic representations. I have made this move very deliberately.

Reading for action

Engaging in theory can be a seductive practice because it is, as Katrak says, "difficult" or "challenging." My theoretical engagement is based less on the perceived difficulty or challenge of theory than it is on the political uses to which theory can be put. "Concepts are a little bit like workers: in order to measure their real value, one has to know what they can do, not where they come from" (Todorov cited in Katrak 160). If post-structuralist literary theories "suspend" the referent, then my first response to post-structuralist theorizing about life writings is that such theorizing is politically irresponsible.

I <u>have</u>, however, found uses for some post-structuralist claims. For example, in my bid to step back from a naive belief in the transparency of language to represent lived experience, I assumed a "post-structuralist" stance which questioned the obviousness of referentiality and the relations among the life being represented, the author, the personal narrative and the reader. Hence, I make an obvious and purposeful intervention in my theorizing which allows me to read "as if" there were a referent even if that referent is not ever fully knowable or representable. Positing a referent in the case of life writings is in some ways analogous to positing the category of "West African women's life writings": not knowing everything there is to know about a referent or a descriptive category does not lead to

the belief that we can know nothing. It is important to recognize how knowledge is acquired and constructed, and toward this end I have explored, through personal narratives about the lives of some West African women, how representations "work and move" in texts.

The title of this section, and, indeed, this chapter is "Reading for Action"; it is a title chosen with the specific intention of conveying one of my primary interests in critical theory. In Mohanty's words: "My concern ... derives from my own implications and investment in contemporary debates in feminist theory, and the urgent political necessity ... of forming strategic coalitions across class, race, and national boundaries" (334). Theorizing takes place within "specialized 'area[s]'" (Said 218), but it also

> must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship--i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas. Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience. (Mohanty 336)

Contrary to J. Hillis Miller's belief that "the relation of literary studies to politics is a little abstract, in a lot of senses" (213) and that writing criticism, teaching, and reading are "not as immediately political as, for example, voting" (213), theorizing can have direct global "effects and implications,"[4] as Edward Said explains in "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors." Thus, finding it important to take responsibility for my own theorizing, I am, in effect, led to examine my own responsibilities as a theorist.

If social responsibility should be foremost on the minds of any authors and theorists, then authors, especially of biographical representations, should be responsible not only to the reading audience but also--and perhaps primarily--to the subject whose life is (re)presented. As Clifford Geertz points out with regard to anthropological writing, there has traditionally been a gap between the reading audience and the informants:

> One of the major assumptions upon which anthropological writing rested until only yesterday, that its subjects and its audience were not only separable but morally disconnected, that the first were to be described but not addressed, the second informed but not implicated, has fairly well dissolved. (Geertz 132)

Today, according to Geertz, anthropological writing is opening its doors and is beginning to address its subjects as well as its audience "back home." Yet, it may be asked, even if life writings--ethnographic case studies and life histories, "fictional" autobiographies, autobiographies--are "responsibly" written, for what purpose should I read them? What knowledge will I gain?

The authors of Interpreting Women's Lives suggest that personal narratives of/by women can be read to "[explore] the links between the evolution of subjectivity, the acquisition of language, and the development of a feminine identity" (5), and they go on to say:

> Women's personal narratives can also provide a vital entry point for examining the interaction between individual and society in the construction of gender. Traditional explorations of social dynamics have tended to emphasize either the constraints of social structure or the power of individual agency.... Our reading of women's personal narratives suggests the need to understand the dynamic relation between the two. (5)

I am certainly a long way, here, from scepticism about the referentiality of a text. But this is a deliberate move. Personal narratives can offer a great deal of information if, as the epigraph above states, their "newly forming audience [is instructed] about how to read and hear" the stories (DeVault 112).

Basically, my whole thesis has been leading up to the point that "Texts work and move because they are read" (111). And by following the reading strategies I have set in motion, I can hope to achieve, for example, an understanding of cross-cultural differences specific to the West African women whose life writings I have read and perhaps also (and this is much more tentative) of the cultures from which the West African women come. Achieving such an understanding of, or at least acknowledging and celebrating the existence of, cross-cultural differences is of paramount importance if oppressed groups are ever to overcome their oppression, as Audre Lorde argues in her essay "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference":

> Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all.... [W]e do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives. (115-116)

Lorde highlights the necessity to view differences among cultures, ages, races, classes, abilities, etc. as enabling perspectives because, even within the global hegemony, understanding differences can serve as a "springboard for [instigating] creative change."

Audre Lorde also states that it is too often the case that oppressors call upon the oppressed to explain themselves, "to teach

the oppressors their mistakes" (114). I submit that such teaching or--should I say--learning could occur, among other places, by reading the life writings of/by those who have already spoken. Perhaps reading life writings constitutes one step in the right direction and away from what Lorde cites as the "constant drain of [oppressed peoples'] energy" (115) resulting from the oppressors' habits of continually calling upon the oppressed to explain themselves. Lorde contends that,

> Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes.... The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. (114, 115)

Substitution of the word "theorists" in the foregoing quotation for the word "oppressors" does not seem completely amiss for two reasons: First, it is through reading and theorizing that literary critics acquire knowledge of the subjects of their reading. And secondly, as critics, we too often forget that our theorizing can have a greater impact on the world than we may imagine, as Edward Said cogently argues.

If as Patrocinio Schweickart says, "Literature acts upon the world by acting on its readers," then by "learning" how to read texts, by finding "transformative solution[s that] would involve more explicit attention to methods for reading" (DeVault 112) and by assuming responsibility for our reading and theorizing, instead of "evad[ing] responsibility for [our] actions," we can, in fact, read with a view toward acting "for creative change" (Lorde 115).

Notes

1. This is a difficult point because the factors such as race, gender, class, age, religion, etc. are constitutive of the reader, the author and the subject whose life is being represented. Thus, if the reader is very far removed from the experiences or culture represented in a life writing, communication may be more tenuous than if the reader were, for example, reading a personal narrative of someone her own age and from her own culture.

2. References to laughter occurred more frequently than I originally noticed before my attention was drawn to the passage in Head Above Water. In fact, one of the organizing principles of Laura Bohannan's autobiographical ethnography is laughter, as its title, Return to Laughter, suggests. This title took on an added significance in light of Emecheta's many references to laughter.

3. It should be noted, here, that referentiality is also called into question by lived experiences. As I argue in my Introduction, the term "West African women," when used in a prescriptive referential capacity, is very problematic because the diversity of individual West African women's experiences are enough to call down the notion that there is a homogeneous field of "West African women." Thus, it is not only "theory" which problematizes notions of referentiality, but literary theories problematize referentiality in what I perceive to be a potentially more pernicious manner.

4. Edward Said points to two such instances:

> [T]he Middle East and Latin America ... provide evidence of a direct connection between specialized "area" scholarship and public policy, in which media representations reinforce not sympathy and understanding, but the use of force and brutality against native societies. (Said 218, his emphasis)

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